SAI BABA OF SHIRDI

by

Perin S. Bharucha

© 1980 Shri Sai Sansthan, Shirdi.

2nd Edition 1984

Price Rs. 6.50

Printed at Bombay National Printers Pvt. Ltd., 42, G. D. Ambekar Marg, Wadala, Bombay-400 031, and Published by K. H. Kakre, Court Receiver, Shri Sai Baba Sansthan, Shirdi, Sai Niketan, Bombay-400 014.

About the Author

Mrs. Perin S. Bharucha is a graduate in arts, and in law, of the University of Bombay. She holds a senior position in one of the country's leading companies. She is the author of the first novel in English about the Parsis. She has also written several short stories and articles.

Mrs. Bharucha has been a devotee of Sai Baba since 1961.

So that the proceeds from this book may be utilised for the objects of Shri Sai Baba Sansthan, Shirdi, Mrs. Bharucha has made over to it every right therein.

Foreword

I am happy to place this compact volume by Smt. Perin S. Bharucha on Shri Sai Baba in the hands of Sai devotees. The timing of the publication coincides with an event of special significance — this year we are celebrating the silver jubilee of the consecration of the idol of Shri Sai Baba in the Samadhi Mandir at Shirdi.

In *Sai Baba of Shirdi* the author has succeeded in presenting a finely etched portrait of the Saint of Shirdi with a rare balance of economy of words and depth.

I have no doubt that the book, pocket-sized and moderately priced, will find an honoured place in the collection of every Sai devotee.

K. H. Kakre,
Court Receiver,

I am very happy to present the Second Edition of this book at such a short time.

K. H. Kakre,
Court Receiver,
Shri Sai Baba Sansthan,
Shirdi

Preface

Belief in God, or men of God, is not a matter of reason. One either believes, or one does not.

This is a distillate of the anecdotes about Sai Baba contained in Nagesh Gunaji's English rendition of the *Sai Satcharita*. Its purpose is not to add to the numbers of those who believe in him but to better acquaint those who do with the essential humanity of the one in whom they have reposed faith — his simplicity, his humility, his solicitude, his humour and, of course, his astonishing spiritual power. Men of remarkable powers have been known in this land since time immemorial. They have been of two kinds — the great *rishis* who have been aloof from the concerns of ordinary man; and, latterly, the God-men who have delighted in exhibiting their powers on the widest available stage, in the most ostentatious manner. Sai Baba was a Sadguru who used his spiritual power to succour the travail of humanity but he needed no wider stage and no life style other than that of a modest Indian villager.

Though several books have been written on Sai Baba of Shirdi, I regard the *Sai Satcharita* as the most authoritative because the writing of it

was started during Sai Baba's lifetime, and with his permission and blessings. Its author Govindrao Raghunath Dabholkar (popularly known as Annasaheb, and whom Sai Baba prophetically nicknamed Hemadpant*) lived in Shirdi off and on for weeks at a time, between 1910 and 1916, after which he became a permanent resident of the village. Many of the events recorded by him were, therefore, ones which he had witnessed.

Sai Baba of Shirdi has come to be better known after his death than he was during his lifetime. His followers run into millions and their tribe increases with every passing year.

It could be argued that there are more Christians and Muslims in the world today than there were during the lifetimes of Christ and Mohammed and that, therefore, a mere numerical increase in followers (especially in a land which has a population problem) is no yardstick for judging the merit or otherwise of a teacher or prophet. What must needs be pointed out in this context is that what Sai Baba of Shirdi began was not a new religious movement, nor did he

---

* The name is corruption of Hemadripant, a well-known minister of the Yadav Kings Mahadev and Ramdev of Devgiri. Hemadripant had made a great reputation for himself as a learned man and as the author of many works dealing with spiritual subjects. He had also invented new methods of book-keeping and was the originator of the Modi script. Annasaheb Dabholkar not only wrote the **Sai Satcharita** but also looked after the management and accounts of the Sai Sansthan at Shirdi after Baba's **Maha-Samadhi** in 1918 till his own death in 1929.

ever seek to wean a devotee away from the faith into which he was born. On the contrary, he expressly disapproved of proselytisation or "getting yourself a new father" as he once called it. He constantly exhorted his devotees not to deprecate the religious practices and precepts of those whose beliefs differed from their own.

Told on the following pages is the story of the Saint who gave to millions of his countrymen what is best described as the gift of faith.

I

During the middle of the 19th century, there lived, in Dhoopkhede, Aurangabad District, a rich Muslim gentlemen. His name was Chand Patil and he was headman of his village. Once, while on his way to Aurangabad City, Chand Patil lost his mare. The distraught man was returning home, carrying the saddle on his back, when he came upon a *fakir* seated under a mango tree. The mendicant monk wore a long white robe. Clasped under his arm was a sturdy wooden stick. The *fakir*, who was filling a clay pipe with tobacco, called out to Chand Patil to rest a while. But the headman of Dhoopkhede was too frantic over his loss and explained why he could not stop to chat. The *fakir* thereupon advised him to conduct his search at a nearby stream. The mare was found almost immediately and Chand Patil returned to thank the man who had guided him to it. He noticed that though the *fakir's* clay pipe was now tamped and ready, there was nothing to light it with, nor any water to dampen the cloth through which the smoke is drawn. As Chand Patil wondered how the *chillum* was going to be lit, the *fakir* thrust a pair of tongs into the ground near his feet and drew out a live coal. The *fakir* then prodded at another spot, this time using his wooden stick, and a thin stream of water oozed out. As the two men sat and shared a quiet smoke, the wonderstruck villager realised that the performance he had just witnessed was most exceptional and, in the fashion of those times, invited the

stranger to his home. The *fakir* accepted Chand Patil's hospitality and stayed with him in Dhoopkhede for a short while.

When a marriage was contracted for Chand Patil's nephew, the *fakir* house-guest accompanied the groom's entourage to Shirdi* where the bride resided. When the bullock carts rolled into a field adjoining the Khandoba† temple at Shirdi, the temple custodian, Mhalasapati, rushed out to greet the visitors. As the members of the marriage party alighted, Mhalasapati bid each one welcome. When it came to the *fakir's* turn, Mhalasapati greeted him with the words, "*Ya*, Sai." And that was how the *fakir* came to be named Sai Baba. Sai is Persian for 'saint' and Baba is a Hindi endearment meaning 'loved father'.

When the marriage festivities were over, Chand Patil and his family returned to Dhoopkhede but Sai Baba stayed on in Shirdi. This happened in 1858. Sai Baba lived in Shirdi for an unbroken span of sixty years till his *Maha-Samadhi* on October 15, 1918.

The trip with Chand Patil was not Sai Baba's first visit to Shirdi. He had been seen there earlier — in 1854. Described as "a tall, gaunt youth of about sixteen", he had established himself under a margosa tree. The inhabitants of Shirdi recalled

---

* Shirdi means "sugarcane" and the village probably came to be known by this name because of its location in the heart of Maharashtra's sugarcane growing belt.

† The local deity.

being surprised to see so young a man practising difficult yogic exercises. It had also been apparent that he had no interest in worldly possessions. People had wondered about him and asked each other who he could be and where he came from but, since he never spoke to anyone, nobody had the answers.

One day a local man was possessed by Khandoba and people questioned him about the strange boy who lived in their midst. They were directed to dig at a particular spot under the tree where the young man lived. When this was done, the villagers were surprised to discover clay bricks underneath a flat stone. When the stone was removed, a corridor was found. This in turn led to a cellar which contained several structures in the shape of a cow's head, a few wooden boards, some necklaces and four oil lamps which were then burning. On being questioned, the young man had explained that the site of the excavation was the place where his Guru (in an earlier incarnation) had lived*. In later years, devotees of Sai Baba came to believe that it must have been for this reason that he spent sixty years of his life in an obscure village like Shirdi.

After a stay of about three years, the young man who had made his home under the margosa tree had left Shirdi just as mysteriously as he had

---

* After Sai Baba's fame had spread, the area surrounding the margosa tree was purchased by a devotee and a platform was built around the tree. It is believed that those who burn incense there on Thursdays and Fridays find happiness.

first appeared there. It is therefore possible that when Mhalasapati greeted the *fakir* in Chand Patil's entourage with the words, "Welcome, Sai", he recognised him as the same young man who had mystified Shirdi residents a few years earlier.

After Sai Baba's return to Shirdi in 1858, people observed a change in his old routine. Though by day he still spent a great deal of time under his favourite tree, and occasionally sat near a stream on the outskirts of the village, the nights were spent either in the village's dilapidated mosque or in the *chavadi.* Sometimes he walked to Neemgaon, 2 kilometres north of Shirdi, and sometimes to Rahata, 5 kilometres in the opposite direction. Once from a visit to Rahata he brought back with him saplings of marigold and jasmine. After clearing a small patch of land, Sai Baba planted the shrubs and tended them. At the end of three years, under his daily ministrations, a beautiful garden bloomed on what had once been barren land.*

Wayfaring monks and ascetics of different religious orders who stopped over in Shirdi on their way to the then better known pilgrim centres of Rameshwar and Pandharpur often talked to the young fakir and one of them, (a disciple of Akalkot Maharaj†) described him as "a diamond on a dunghill" whose real worth had not yet been realised by those around him.

* It is behind this site that Sai Baba's Samadhi Mandir now stands.

† A well-known saint of Maharashtra during the 19th century.

Sai Baba's worldly possessions at this point of time consisted of a few clay pipes, a tin can, a white cotton robe and a short wooden stick. He wore a piece of white cloth around his head which was knotted at the back and flowed down from behind his left ear. He was usually barefoot and a piece of sackcloth served him as a cushion. He kept a fire burning perpetually in the mosque and when he sat next to it, he faced south. Even at this stage of his stay in Shirdi, Sai Baba did not mix with the local people and he was scarcely ever seen speaking to anyone. He was often heard muttering sacred Urdu phrases to himself but his manner at such times made it clear to those in the vicinity that he did not wish to be overheard. He also burned little earthenware oil lamps inside the mosque — as is done in Hindu temples. His favourite expression however was of Muslim origin — "Allah Mallik" meaning "God is the master".

Apart from a handful of food and some small quantities of tobacco for which he begged, the only thing he really seemed to need was oil for his lamps. The people of Shirdi ignored him as a young man who was slightly touched in the head and indulged in religious practices which were not in keeping with the precepts of either Hinduism or Islam.

One day the shopkeepers of Shirdi decided to have some fun at the expense of the local eccentric. All those whom Sai Baba approached

with his tin can refused to give him oil for his lamps. Unperturbed, the young *fakir* returned to the mosque. In full view of those who had followed him to see what he would do, he filled the empty can with water and drank from it. Then filling it with water a second time, he poured small quantities of the water into the earthen lamps and put a flame to the wicks. To the shock and dismay of the watching crowd, the lamps burned as with oil, and they burnt through the night. From then on, nobody in Shirdi dared speak of him as "that madman in the mosque". As word had spread through the village and the surrounding countryside of how the lamps had been lit, it dawned on people that a man with extraordinary powers dwelt in their midst.

On his trips to Neemgaon Jali, Sai Baba had made the acquaintance of one of the residents by the name of Trimbakji Dengale. When this gentleman's brother failed to have a son, despite his taking a second wife, he was advised to seek Sai Baba's blessings. Soon after doing so, a male child was born to the younger Dengale brother. As this news also spread, a steady stream of childless couples from neighbouring towns and villages came to seek Sai Baba's blessings and, within less than a year, the same people returned to Shirdi happy and astonished at the rapid fulfilment of their wishes. As news of the efficacy of Baba's blessings gained circulation, people visited Shirdi in greater numbers. A *fakir* who could turn water into oil and whose benedictions could bestow

progeny upon those who had given up all hopes could surely work other miracles too. And he did. Diseases were cured, disasters were staved off and even death was averted.

As problem after insoluble problem sorted itself out with bewildering ease and as wish after desperate wish was fulfilled, more and more people came to Shirdi to see and experience at first hand the phenomenal powers of the man who had worked these miracles.

And now there was more curiosity than ever before about the white robed *fakir* who spoke in parables and whose followers belonged to all castes and communities. Who was he and where had he come from? But there were still no answers. In the absence of any explanations from Sai Baba himself, a controversy arose amongst his increasing tribe of followers as to his origins, caste and community. The Muslims claimed him as one of their *Pirs* and his Hindu followers regarded him as an incarnation of various deities in their pantheon. Sai Baba himself actively discouraged speculation amongst his devotees as to his identity and background. Despite extensive enquiries nobody was ever able to prove conclusively whether Sai Baba was a Hindu or a Muslim.

Sai Baba was once examined on commission in Shirdi as a witness in a criminal case which had come up in the Magistrate's Court in Dhulia.

When asked for his name, he replied, "They call me Sai Baba."

Creed or religion?

"Kabir."*

Caste or community?

"Parvardigar."

Not a single answer was of the least help in establishing his true identity. There is no doubt that the reason for Sai Baba's refusal to disclose his origins was that amity between Hindus and Muslims was a cause dear to his heart.

"Rama and Rahim are one and the same," Sai Baba told his devotees. "So why can't their followers join hands and behave sanely?"

When mere words did not produce the desired results, Sai Baba resorted to other means to promote goodwill between the two communities. The following account illustrates one of the methods he employed to lessen the tensions between his Hindu and Muslim followers.

Gopalrao Gund, a Circle Inspector at Kopergaon, was one of Sai Baba's devotees. He had three wives but no children. When, with Baba's blessings, a son was born to him, he decided to celebrate the event by organising an *Urus* at Shirdi. He discussed the proposal with other devotees and after everybody approved of the idea, Baba's permission was sought for holding the celebrations.

* Late 15th century religious reformer who had both Hindu and Muslim followers.

What is significant is the day Sai Baba picked for holding the *Urus*. He chose Ramnavmi, the day of Lord Rama's birth — a major Hindu festival. With this simple directive Sai Baba took a giant stride towards promoting harmony between his Hindu and Muslim followers. As events developed over the next five years, the Sandal procession by which the Muslims honour their great men also came to be held on Ramnavmi day, so that the various rituals connected with both celebrations were performed side by side. To this day, Sai Baba's Hindu and Muslim followers in Shirdi celebrate Ramnavmi together — without clash or quarrel.

Followers of Sai Baba who tried to ascertain his communal background on the basis of personal observations of the man and his life style fared no better than those who had tried to resolve the mystery by instituting far-reaching enquiries. His Hindi was as fluent as his Urdu. Though his ears were pierced in the Hindu tradition, he was a forceful advocate of the Muslim practice of circumcision. Though he lived in a mosque, he always had a fire going in it. He not only had oil lamps burning night and day, he even permitted the blowing of conches and ringing of bells inside his mosque — practices which are contrary to the tenets of Islam. On the other hand, it was the name of Allah which was always on his lips.

Sai Baba disapproved of extremes of religious orthodoxy. He never fasted and he did not like his devotees to do so either. "God is not to be found

on an empty stomach," was his advice to those who believed that self-denial was the route to spiritual progress.

Sai Baba himself ate very little; and the little he required was obtained by begging from a few families in Shirdi who had come to consider it a privilege to render this services. But many were the times when Sai Baba himself distributed food. What was unique about these occasions was that everything from the shopping to the actual cooking was done by Baba himself without any assistance from anyone. And, as if that was not enough, he personally served the food to all who were present in his mosque. The effort this involved was stupendous because there were often fifty to a hundred people around.

An oft raised question was, "Did Sai Baba distribute non-vegetarian food even amongst his orthodox Hindu devotees?"

It has been authoritatively recorded that Baba's vegetarian devotees were never permitted to touch non-vegetarian food, nor did he ever encourage them to relinquish their religious beliefs on the question of diet.

Since it is a well-established principle of Hindu beliefs never to doubt the bona fides of any order given by a Guru, Sai Baba sometimes put his close devotees to the test. Dada Kelkar, an ultra orthodox Brahmin devotee, was once given some money and asked by Baba to go and buy some meat from

the local bazaar. Repelled as he must have been at the thought of such an errand, Kelkar nonetheless dressed and started to leave for the market. He knew that that which most pleased any Guru was implicit and unquestioning obedience of an order. When he had gone a few steps, Sai Baba of course called him back saying that he had changed his mind.

Not only did Sai Baba never distinguish on the basis of caste or community, he attached the same importance to the welfare of birds and animals as to that of people.

A lady devotee from Bombay, on a visit to Shirdi, was busy cooking lunch one afternoon when a dog turned up at her kitchen door. As the food was almost ready, she fed the animal some unleavened bread and watched it gulp it down hungrily. That afternoon when she went to the mosque Sai Baba thanked her for feeding *him*. She expressed surprise as she had not met Baba earlier in the day.

"That bread you fed me was lovely," Sai Baba explained to her and the others present. "I enjoyed it so much that it's still making me belch. The dog which came to your door is one with me — I roam in many forms."

Where another Guru might have been content with a verbal discourse on the important Upanishadic doctrine to "see God in all living creatures" Sai Baba taught the same lesson by giving a practical demonstration.

Sai Baba's mosque which he had named the Dwarkamai* was open to all. Dogs, cats, crows and lizards were as welcome as the lame, the blind and the leprous. Poor man, rich man, the able-bodied and the handicapped, all were treated with the same graciousness and courtesy.

Cholkar for instance was a poor man who first heard of Sai Baba from a wandering minstrel's devotional songs extolling his glories. As he was then preparing for a competitive examination for a post with the Civil Court at Thana, he vowed that he would visit Shirdi and pay his respects to Sai Baba if he succeeded in getting this much coveted job. In due course, Cholkar got the job but, because he had a large family to support, he found it impossible to visit Shirdi. To save up enough money to undertake the trip, Cholkar decided to forgo sugar in his tea. When he had collected enough, he went to Shirdi. After doing obeisance before Sai Baba, Cholkar was about to leave the Dwarkamai when he was startled to hear Baba tell another devotee to, "Give this man tea and make sure it's saturated with sugar." These instructions were a clear indication that the secret of the sacrifice Cholkar had made in order to visit Shirdi was known to Sai Baba.

Sai Baba's omniscience was not confined to the doings of human beings.

---

*Dwarka is the town in Saurashtra, Gujarat, which is closely associated with Lord Krishna. Literally translated, it means "open doors" or "gateway". Mai means mother.

One day as he sat as usual before his sacred fire in the mosque, a lizard on the wall made a constant tic-tic sound. A devotee asked whether the sound produced by the lizard was of any particular significance.

"The lizard is happy because her sister from Aurangabad is coming to see her," Baba told him.

This explanation perplexed the devotee but he kept quiet. Minutes later, a gentleman from Aurangabad stopped at the mosque to see Sai Baba. He had come on horseback and had broken journey at Shirdi as the horse was hungry. As the man unslung a cloth bag (containing feed for the horse) and thumped it lightly on the floor, to rid it of dust, a lizard emerged from it and swiftly made its way up the wall to the other one, and the two went scuttling along the rafters.

Though Sai Baba was the very embodiment of kindness and understanding, he also had the most terrible of tempers. When he was angry his eyes were said to resemble a pair of glowing embers and none could look him in the face. Since Sai Baba was equally indifferent to praise and abuse, who or what might anger him was something those around him were never able to predict. But, there was one well-known exception — he could never tolerate any interference in his dealings with his devotees. Why Sai Baba accepted the personal services of certain followers (without regard to the quality of the performance) and rejected those of others, even when volunteered, was something he

never explained to anybody; and any intervention in these matters was guaranteed to enrage him.

One of Baba's devotees was an elderly widow known to all by the affectionate dimunitive 'Mavsibai'. The personal service Baba accepted from her was a body massage. On one occasion some of Baba's devotees thought that Mavsibai was using too much force on Baba's abdominal muscles and cautioned her to go easy lest she do him some harm. The moment he heard this gratuitous reproof Baba flew into a towering rage. Rising from the ground on which he had lain, he grabbed the wooden stick he always carried with him and placing one end of it against a pillar, he plunged the other end into his abdomen. Then gripping the pillar with both hands he moved closer and closer towards it, pushing the stick deep into himself till those watching, aghast, feared that he would rupture a vital organ. However, there was nothing anybody dared say or do. After a while Baba calmed down and everybody was relieved to see that despite what he had done, he had come to no harm whatever. From that day on, Baba's devotees learnt that no matter what happened it was not for them to question how Baba allowed different people to serve him. He was the sole judge of the merits or otherwise of any service rendered unto him.

No one who encountered Sai Baba ever doubted that by virtue of his extraordinary powers he had complete knowledge of events and occurrences even at long distances. Though he never phy-

sically left Shirdi, he was known to materialise himself in other bodies in far distant places. But in order to do so he never went into a trance, nor did he ever interrupt his normal routine in Shirdi itself. Sai Baba constantly exercised what is called "dual consciousness". In other words, he was constantly in and outside the material world. Curiously enough, to those who had seen him, he invariably appeared in a form different from his own, while for the benefit of those who had never even heard of him, he materialised as the well-known figure in the white robe and head cloth. These manifestations, whatever the form they took, were always for a reason. Sai Baba himself spoke frequently of his travels over great distances. Sitting besides his fire in the Dwarkamai, he often regaled his devotees with tales of where he had been and whom he had visited during the night. All his stories were subsequently verifiable and his space-time defying exploits were proved true in every detail.

A devotee's call for help, no matter from how far away from Shirdi, never went unanswered. One Diwali day, Baba was seated as usual in his mosque feeding wood to his sacred fire when he thrust his arm into the flames. Two devotees who were present at the time caught him by the waist and pulled him back. When asked why he had done such a thing, Sai Baba explained, "The wife of a blacksmith was working the bellows of a furnace when her husband called out to her. Forgetting that she had a child tied around her waist,

she ran to her husband and the child fell into the furnace. So I thrust my hand into it and pulled the child out. I don't mind my arm being burnt — I'm glad that the child's life was saved."

Sai Baba, of course, refused to have his burns treated. The doctor who was sent for all the way from Bombay by some of Sai Baba's wealthier devotees was not even permitted to examine the arm, let alone treat it. The only person who was allowed to dress the burns was a leper devotee called Bhagoji Shinde. The "treatment" consisted of the burnt area being massaged with *ghee*, covered with a leaf and wound tight with bandages. It was typical of Sai Baba that he accepted this personal service from one who was an advanced case of leprosy.

Those who had been close to Sai Baba during his lifetime often compared his love for his followers to that of a mother for her children. Just as a mother foresees the needs of a babe in arms, Sai Baba anticipated the needs of his devotees. Just as a mother delights in dressing her child in the finest clothes (though the child itself cannot tell the difference) so Sai Baba delighted in doing things for his people. He lavished care and affection upon them and he rejoiced in their devotion to him. Equally, when his devotees erred, he scolded them, shouted at them and sometimes even beat them with a stick. He knew their innermost thoughts and he granted wishes which were often unspoken. "Be wherever you like, do whatever you choose but remember that every-

thing is known to me," he told his followers.

A lady devòtee residing in a suburb of Bombay once sent Sai Baba a *pedha* with a neighbour who was visiting Shirdi to perform certain religious ceremonies in connection with his father's death. The young man who was in mourning went to do obeisance to Sai Baba but forgot all about the *pedha*. When he called emptyhanded at the Dwarkamai a second time, Sai Baba asked, "What have you brought me?"

"Nothing," replied the young man.

Sai Baba repeated his question and once again the bewildered young man replied in the negative.

"Weren't you given a sweetmeat for me when you started on your journey?" Baba demanded.

The young man thereupon recalled the neighbour's gift and seeking Baba's pardon ran to fetch the *pedha* from his room.

A theft takes place in a man's house. His wife's jewel box is stolen. He finds that the thief is none other than a friend of thirty years. Because of this, rather than lodge a complaint with the police the man weeps before Sai Baba's photograph and the next day the errant friend turns up

at the house to return the jewel box and beg for forgiveness.

To a follower who has turned into an alcoholic, Sai Baba appears in a dream, sits on his chest and refuses to get up until he promises never again to take a drink.

These stories typify thousands of experiences of Sai Baba's followers. The only condition Sai Baba laid down for protecting his devotees from harm and fulfilling their wishes was absolute and abiding faith in him.

"Believe in me with all your heart and I shall protect you," he used to say.

"Turn to me and I shall look after you."

"Cast your burden on me and I will bear it."

"Think of me in your hour of trouble and I shall be by your side."

These might sound like tall claims from one who to all outward appearances was a man like any other but when he was tested and not found wanting, his following multiplied and grew to fantastic proportions.

Times without number Sai Baba saved his devotees from unforeseen dangers by warning them in advance.

When leaving a place of pilgrimage it is traditional for a devotee to seek the Guru's permis-

sion to depart. Many a time Sai Baba was known to refuse permission to a devotee, even if it meant breaking an important appointment. It was his way of testing a devotee's faith and not a single case was recorded of the person concerned suffering as a result of it. Those who were foolish enough to disregard Baba's advice to stay on, suffered mishaps and accidents.

A typical instance was that of an Englishman who came to Shirdi to seek Sai Baba's blessings for a child. He had brought with him a letter of introduction from one of Baba's devotees. As the Englishman was anxious to kneel before Baba and kiss his hand, he made three attempts to step inside the Dwarkamai and all three times Baba stopped him from entering. India's then rulers were not accustomed to such treatment from the "natives" and the offended visitor decided to leave Shirdi at once. When he came to say goodbye, Sai Baba told him not to rush off but to leave Shirdi the following day. This advice went unheeded. Not being permitted to enter the Dwarkamai had been insult enough. As was only to be expected, the horse drawn carriage in which the Englishman left Shirdi met with an accident and its occupant had to spend several days in nearby Kopergaon's hospital.

Tatya Kote was a great devotee of Sai Baba But he too was involved in an almost identical accident when he disregarded his Guru's advice about travelling to Kopergaon one morning. The difference was that Tatya escaped unhurt.

Several cases have been recorded of how Sai Baba saved his devotees from snake bites by specifying in advance where the danger lay from *lamba bava.** But one of the strangest stories recorded is of what happened to a devotee *after* he had been bitten by a snake. Madhavrao Deshpande, one of Sai Baba's constant companions in Shirdi, was bitten by a cobra. In pain and fear, he made his way to the Dwarkamai to seek Sai Baba's help, only to be horrified by the reception he was given.

"Oh vile priest, beware!" Baba shouted on seeing Deshpande. "Do not come up! Go! Go away! Get down!"

Baba's words, though seemingly addressed to his devotee, were in fact orders to the poison in Deshpande's bloodstream. After his rage was spent, Baba spoke to Deshpande in normal tones and advised him to go home and all would be well. And of course so it turned out to be.

Sai Baba often resorted to strange and unorthodox methods to test his devotees. He once asked Kakasaheb Dixit, an orthodox Brahmin who was averse to killing or any act of violence, to slay a goat. At the last minute, just as Dixit was about to strike at the animal with a knife, Baba stayed his hand. Sai Baba was satisfied that whatever his feelings on a particular subject, Dixit was one devotee who would blindly obey the instructions of his Guru.

---

* Literally, the long one. Colloquial for snake.

Equally, Sai Baba met the challenges of those whom he wished to enlist as devotees. Illustrative of this point is the story of a doctor living in Malegaon. The doctor's nephew suffered from an incurable tubercular bone abcess. When all else had failed, the child's parents took him to Shirdi. The boy was placed at Sai Baba's feet and the parents invoked his help.

"Apply some of this *udhi* to the abcess and he will be well in a week," Sai Baba told the parents as he stroked the affected parts of the boy's body, his eyes reassuring the child that his suffering would soon be over. When at the end of the week, the child was in fact completely recovered, the boy's doctor uncle was sufficiently impressed to want to meet the man who had cured a condition medical science had declared incurable. As the doctor was going to Bombay on work, he decided to stop over in Shirdi. While in Manmad, he was told some rather derogatory tales about Sai Baba and the doctor thereupon changed his mind about visiting Shirdi. During his stay in Bombay, for three consecutive nights the doctor heard a disembodied voice ask him, "You still don't believe in me?" Interpreting this strange experience as a message from Sai Baba he once again resolved to visit Shirdi. But the paitent he was attending to in Bombay showed no signs of improvement. The doctor felt that this unexpected delay would prevent him from going to Shirdi. He, therefore, decided, to test Sai Baba's powers. If his patient's fever abated by nightfall he would

leave for Shirdi the next morning. Literally within minutes of this unspoken challenge the patient's temperature started to drop. The doctor visited Shirdi and remained a staunch believer for the rest of his life.

The Malegaon doctor was not the only man to hear Sai Baba spoken of in derogatory terms. No Saint has ever been without detractors and calumniators. There were some who described Sai Baba as a hypnotist and clairvoyant who preyed on the gullible whilst others dismissed him as a madman who lived in a tumble-down mosque, talked nonsense and extracted money from those who went to see him. It is true that Sai Baba demanded money from people but it was never money for its own sake, nor did he ask it of everybody. When he did ask, the demand was for a specific amount and the quantum was always symbolic. For instance, if he asked someone for three rupees, the amount might in the case of that particular individual symbolise the surrender of lust, anger and avarice while with another person the same sum could be symbolic of a pledge to practise charity, compassion and self-control. Though enormous sums of money flowed into Shirdi after Sai Baba's fame had spread, he never kept any of it nor did his life style undergo the slightest change. He owned no property, he built no ashrams and costly gifts were returned to the donors. The money collected daily was distributed by him each evening amongst the poor and the needy. Except

for a few coins which he set aside to purchase oil for his lamps, wood for his fire and tobacco for his pipes, he kept nothing for himself. At the time of his death in 1918 Sai Baba's worldly possessions were exactly what they had been when he came to Shirdi in 1858 — a white cotton robe, a piece of headcloth, a tin can, a wooden stick and some clay pipes.

Though Sai Baba himself admitted to a high degree of proficiency in Yoga and, indeed, in his early years in Shirdi had been seen practising very difficult *asanas* under his margosa tree, it was many years before his devotees realised the extent of his mastery over Yoga.

Dhauti, a yogic practice for cleaning the stomach and intestines, involves a moist piece of cloth, 3 inches wide and 22½ feet long, being swallowed and permitted to remain inside the body for approximately half an hour. But like everything else about him, Sai Baba's version of *Dhauti* was spectacular. Several unimpeachable witnesses once saw him disgorge his intestines, rinse them in water and actually hang them up to dry on the branches of a tree.

Sai Baba was also well versed in *Khanda Yoga*. One night, a visitor to the Dwarkamai fled the place in terror because he saw Sai Baba's limbs

separated from his trunk and strewn in different parts of the mosque.

It is said that a Realised Man can be in a state of permanent *samadhi* and in such a man not only is a trancelike state unnecessary to achieve his purpose, but sleep, as ordinary people understand it, is also unnecessary.

Sai Baba's mode of "sleeping" illustrates this point.

During the early years of his stay in Shirdi, a grateful devotee had presented Sai Baba with a five-foot long wooden plank to sleep on as the floor of the mosque was always dusty. But rather than leave it on the floor, Sai Baba tied the plank to the rafters of the mosque with strips of old cloth so that it hung suspended like a swing, some six feet off the ground. How the rags of cloth bore the weight of the plank, let alone that of the man who sat and slept on it, was something observers never figured out. People saw him seated on his swing bed and people saw him reclining on it, but nobody ever saw him get on or off it. Levitation is the only means by which Sai Baba could have climbed onto this strange bedstead and manage to remain on it without tearing off the supports. When the curiosity of his devotees as regards the process of his mounting and dismounting the plank got out of hand, Sai Baba flew into one of his famous rages and breaking the plank into pieces threw it away. After this, he went back to sleeping on the floor. Many years later, another

devotee hearing Sai Baba's wistful references to his swing bed offered to install another one for him in the mosque. The offer was turned down because, as Baba explained, he "wouldn't like to sleep up there, leaving Mhalasapati* on the floor." When the offer was made of one for Mhalasapati also, Sai Baba's reply was, "How can he sleep on it? Only one who can sleep with his eyes wide open can sleep that way." Was Sai Baba referring to his state of permanent *samadhi* when he spoke of sleeping with the "eyes wide open"?

There were many extraordinary occurrences at Shirdi which added to Sai Baba's fame and following.

One evening a terrible storm threatened the village. Thunder and lightning were followed by a torrential downpour. The village was flooded and, anticipating disaster, people rushed to the Dwarkamai for help. Standing at the door of the mosque Sai Baba looked up at the sky and shouted at the elements to stop their fury; and within minutes the rains subsided and all was calm.

On another occasion, the fire which Sai Baba kept going in his mosque started to burn very bright; the flames rose high, till they almost touched the rafters. Those present in the mosque began to worry that the roof would burn down. When Sai Baba saw what was happening he rose angrily

* The custodian of the Khandoba temple who later became one of Sai Baba's closest companions and devotees.

from where he was seated and rapped the pillar in front of the pit with his wooden stick and, with every stroke, the flames descended and within moments the fire was down to its usual, safe level.

What was perhaps the most spectacular and effective exhibition of Sai Baba's phenomenal powers was witnessed in 1886. He announced that to rid himself of an attack of asthma he had decided to go into a state of deep meditation.

"Protect my body for three days," he told Mhalasapati, "and if I do not return at the end of that time, bury me in that field."

After pointing out the precise spot where he wished to be buried and leaving instructions to mark the grave with two flag posts Sai Baba took a deep breath and fell down. His breathing stopped. There was no heartbeat or pulse. He was pronounced dead and the village authorities wished to hold an inquest. In a climate like India's a dead body has to be burnt or buried within 24 hours. But Mhalasapati, with total disregard for the authorities, sat with Baba's head in his lap guarding the body for a full three days at the end of which Sai Baba resumed breathing and returned to life.

To a Guru who could perform such astonishing feats, the ability to read people's minds and foresee future events must have been child's play.

A Bombay devotee, Kaka Mahajani, visited Shirdi with the intention of staying there for a

week. He had so planned his trip that he could be in Shirdi for the Gokul Ashtami celebrations.

"When are you returning home?" was the first question Sai Baba asked on meeting him.

Taken aback, Mahajani replied that he would leave whenever he was told to.

"Go tomorrow," Baba ordered.

On his return to Bombay, Kaka Mahajani discovered that his return was anxiously awaited by his employer and that a letter asking him to resume work had been mailed to Shirdi a day earlier. The letter was subsequently re-directed to him at Bombay. The post marks proved that Sai Baba could not have known about it when he had issued instructions for Mahajani to go back.

At another time, a lawyer devotee of Sai Baba, Bhausaheb Dhumal, stopped at Shirdi to see Baba en route to Niphad on an important case. The lawyer had intended only a fleeting stopover in Shirdi but Sai Baba insisted that he stay a full week. Dhumal was worried but did as instructed and no harm was done by his unplanned sojourn in Shirdi. The magistrate before whom Dhumal was to have appeared had been taken ill and the case had been adjourned.

Many a man who had gone to Shirdi with friends or relatives out of simple curiosity, priv-

ately determined not to do obeisance to a controversial *fakir* of uncertain origins, was astonished to find himself in the presence of his household deity in place of the white robed figure he had expected to see. Thus, in the eyes of a caste proud Brahmin astrologer from Nasik, Sai Baba was transformed into Guru Gholap Swami and for the benefit of a sceptical Hindu doctor (who had made up his mind not to bow his head before a Muslim) Sai Baba was transformed into Lord Rama. So many cases of this nature were recorded during Sai Baba's lifetime that it is safe to conclude that this was his way of bringing home to his followers the concept of "the oneness of God".

Contact with Sai Baba quietened the craving for material possessions in many (though by no means all) followers. The majority of visitors to the Dwarkamai came in search of temporal benefits and when these were obtained, a few underwent a change of heart and sought Sai Baba's advice and guidance for their spiritual welfare. Many a newcomer to Shirdi experienced a unique and unparalleled joy at the touch of Sai Baba's hand upon his head. Men forgot their fatigue, thirst and hunger after long and arduous journeys, marvelling at the fact that just being in his presence had been enough to cause a sea change in their consciousness.

But since Sai Baba was a spiritual master who had elected to live and teach amongst people leading worldly lives rather than spend his life in the solitude of a cave or the isolation of a mountain

top, it was not surprising that the help and guidance which his followers sought from him were not always confined to matters spiritual. The warding off of calamities and dangers, and the welfare of his devotees, were Sai Baba's prime concern.

The experiences of an Ahmednagar devotee, Damu Anna, illustrate how he was saved from disasters which would have led to his financial ruin.

Damu Anna had received a business proposal from a friend in Bombay to speculate on the cotton exchange. Damu's broker friend guaranteed him a two-lakh rupee profit at virtually no risk. The strategy as outlined to Damu was certainly tempting, but Damu could not quite make up his mind to go ahead with it. Because he was in two minds, he decided to seek Sai Baba's advice. He wrote a detailed letter to another devotee, Deshpande (who lived in Shirdi), setting out the facts and urged him to obtain Baba's opinion in the matter. On receiving the letter Deshpande took it to the Dwarkamai and placed it before Baba.

"What's the matter? What's this about?" Baba asked pointing to Damu's letter.

Deshpande explained that the letter was from Damu who wanted Baba's advice on something.

"What does he write? What is he planning? It seems he is trying to reach for the unattainable.

Can't he be content with what he has? Read the letter to me," Baba instructed.

"It contains what you just spoke of," Deshpande replied. "Oh, Baba, you sit calm and composed in one place and agitate the minds of your devotees and when they feel restless, you draw them to you to seek your advice. You obviously know the contents of Damu's letter, so why ask me to read it out to you?"

But at Baba's insistence Deshpande read the letter to him.

"Damu Anna has gone mad!" Baba expostulated when Deshpande finished. "Write and tell him that there's nothing wanting in his house. Tell him to be satisfied with what he has and not bother about acquiring lakhs of rupees."

Sai Baba's instructions were carried out, but Damu who had been hoping for a favourable reply was crestfallen. He was so disappointed that he even regretted having consulted Sai Baba. Since Deshpande had hinted in his reply to Damu that it was always better to seek advice from a Guru in person, rather than through an intermediary, and considering the amount which was at stake, Damu decided that a personal consultation on the subject might be worth his while. However, after reaching Shirdi, Damu lost his nerve. He couldn't bring himself to speak of such a business deal within the confines of the Dwarkamai. As he wondered what method to adopt in order to en-

list Baba's help, the unworthy thought crossed his mind that perhaps if he was to offer him a share in the profits, Baba might agree to use his extraordinary powers to ensure success of the venture. Sai Baba thereupon gave the umpteenth demonstration of his omniscience by answering Damu's unspoken question. "I do not wish to be entangled in something as materialistic as profit sharing."

"Later, Damu was happy that he had followed Baba's advice to have nothing to do with the venture — because, as events transpired, the man who participated in the venture in his stead lost a fortune.

On another occasion, in the course of a visit to Shirdi, Damu was seated at Baba's feet in the Dwarkamai, but his thoughts were far from spiritual matters. There was a State-wide shortage of grain at that particular time, and Damu was weighing the pros and cons of buying low and selling high. This time, too, Sai Baba read Damu's thoughts and clearly told him, "Don't do it. You'll end up selling at a lower price than you'll buy."

As the price of grain soared and Damu felt he ought not to have heeded Baba's advice, the unpredictable Indian monsoon stopped playing truant. This gave rise to hopes of bumper crops everywhere, and there was a sudden slump in prices. The result was that those who had held on to large stocks in the hope of realising bigger profits (in the manner of contemplated by Damu) found themselves compelled to sell at a loss.

Then there is Damu's own account of two important questions he put to Sai Baba and the replies he was given.

Once while he sat at Baba's feet along with a great many others, Damu put two questions to him. Did all the thousands of people who flocked to Shirdi benefit spiritually?

"Look at that mango tree in blossom," Baba told him. "If all the flowers bore fruit, what a splendid crop it would be. But do they? Most fall off. Very few remain."

Damu's second question concerned himself. When Baba passed away he would be hopelessly adrift. How would he fare then?

Baba's answer was, "Think of me and I shall be with you."

Sai Baba employed a rustic wit and humour in his dealings with people, especially so when conveying the essence of his teachings to devotees.

For instance, a ritual offering to God before partaking of a meal is an ancient custom in many parts of the world. In a poor country like India, where food is often scarce, this practice assumes special significance.

Here is the story of how Sai Baba brought

home this lesson to Annasaheb Dabholkar*, nicknamed Hemadpant.

Like all Indian villages, Shirdi had its weekly "bazaar day" when people from the neighbouring areas collected to trade.

Since "bazaar day" in Shirdi fell on Sundays, the Dwarkamai attracted larger crowds than usual on that day. On one such Sunday, Hemadpant was washing Sai Baba's feet while chanting God's name. Other resident devotees of Shirdi were also present. Deshpande, catching sight of something sticking to Hemadpant's coat sleeve, laughingly drew the latter's attention to it. As Hemadpant straightened his arm to inspect his coat-sleeve, a few grains of *chana* rolled out and landed on the floor. Everybody laughed and many theories were propounded as to how the *chana* had found their way up Hemadpant's sleeve and managed to remain there despite the fact that he had been bending forward with his arms down while washing Baba's feet. Since nobody came up with a satisfactory explanation Sai Baba's opinion was sought.

"What's so strange about it?" Sai Baba laughed. "I know this fellow is in the habit of not sharing food with others. Today is bazaar day and he's been eating *chana* by himself. And here's proof of his bad habit."

"That's not true!" Hemadpant protested.

---

* **Author of the Sai Satcharita.**

"You know I never eat anything without sharing it with those around me. Besides I haven't been to the bazaar today and I haven't bought any *chana*. How could I have been eating something I didn't even have!"

"It's true that you share food with those present when you're eating," Baba conceded. "And, of course, it isn't your fault if there's nobody around just then. But what about me? Am I not *always* with you? Do you offer me anything before you eat it?"

This is a typical example of Sai Baba's method of imparting instruction to a devotee in a particular way of life. To the devout Hindu, the ritual offering of food to a deity (or, as in this case, a Guru) is not just a simple "thank you" gesture. It is believed that if, before something is enjoyed with any of the five senses, it is first offered to God, or Guru, the question as to whether or not the object is worthy of enjoyment by divinity will automatically arise in the mind of him who is about to partake of it. This in turn leads a man to better habits, purifies his mind, gradually diminishes his desires for worldly pleasures and thus sets him on the road to self-realisation.

Sai Baba was often heard to discourage his followers from trying to find God through religi-

ous tracts. Nor did Sai Baba ever write anything. As far as is known, there isn't so much as a specimen of his handwriting in anybody's possession. He never even signed his name. Because he had no name to sign? Once when pressed by some of his devotees to reveal his true identity to them, he said his name was Nasatya* which as a name discloses as little as the appellation "Sai Baba".

Many *pundits* and *maulanas*, on first contact with Sai Baba, took him to be an ignoramus, till he shattered their illusions by displaying absolute mastery over the depth and meaning of the scriptures of many religions.

Sai Baba made it clear that just as God was not to be found in books, he was not confined to hallowed spots.

The Hindus maintain that to bathe at least once in the holy Tirth of Prayag (where the Ganga and the Jamuna meet) is the sacred duty of every true believer, and pilgrims in their thousands flock to Prayag each year. One day, Das Ganu Maharaj — one of the resident devotees — decided that it was time he undertook such a pilgrimage. As was customary, he came to seek Sai Baba's permission to leave.

"It's not necessary to go on such a long journey," Baba told him. "Believe me, our Prayag is right here."

---

* The Nasätya, according to Hindu mythology, were the physicians of the Gods.

As Das Ganu bowed to his Guru and placed his head on Sai Baba's feet in acceptance of his wishes, two streams of water flowed out of Baba's toes. Das Ganu was overwhelmed. He was also convinced that he did not have to bathe at the confluence of India's holiest rivers to accumulate merit for himself in his next incarnation.

There is another story about the same Das Ganu Maharaj which illustrates that Sai Baba liked his devotees to be precise in their choice of words when asking for fulfilment of a wish.

The phrase "Allah Mallik" (God is the master) was constantly on Baba's lips, and he encouraged those close to him to sing God's name. *Namasaptaha* is the round the clock chanting of God's name for seven days and on one occasion Sai Baba asked Das Ganu Maharaj to undertake this recitation. Das Ganu agreed to do so provided Sai Baba could assure him that the God Vithoba* would manifest himself in Shirdi on the seventh day. Placing a hand on Das Ganu's breast Sai Baba promised him that Vithoba would appear in Shirdi.

On the seventh day Vithoba did manifest Himself at Shirdi though not to Das Ganu Maharaj.

Kakasaheb Dixit, another resident devotee, was sitting in meditation after his morning bath when Vithoba appeared to him in a vision. He

* A popular appellation for Vithal.

said nothing about it to anybody but when he went to the Dwarkamai at noon, Baba asked him, "Did Vithal come? You saw him? He will play truant if you aren't careful. Catch Him. He will escape if you're inattentive."

Dixit was somewhat confused by Sai Baba's words but asked no questions. Later that very day, a hawker from outside Shirdi came to his door with 25 or 30 pictures of Vithoba. The representation of God Vithoba in these pictures was an exact replica of the figure seen by Dixit in the morning's vision. Recalling Sai Baba's words about not letting Him "escape", he immediately purchased a copy and placed it in his shrine for worship.

The tale told about a blind woman who wanted her vision back "only to see you with these eyes, Baba" and whose sight was restored for just the length also bears out the belief that Sai Baba wanted his followers to be specific when expressing a wish.

Since Sai Baba not only knew people's innermost thoughts but helped them in their time of need and was a source of comfort to those who had faith in him, he fulfilled many a devotee's idea of God on earth. In fact, Shirdi devotees addressed him as *Deva*. However, Sai Baba him-

self never made any such claims. On the contrary, he always spoke of himself as "a humble servant" of God to whom he referred either as "Allah" or the "Fakir". But despite his devotees' persistence in treating him as an incarnation of God, and the troubled who turned up in an unending stream at Shirdi, life at the Dwarkamai was not all solemnity and reverence. There was much laughter and gaiety in Sai Baba's mosque and his close companions took considerable liberties in their conversations with him.

Madhavrao Deshpande whom Sai Baba referred to by the affectionate diminutive "Shama", was, perhaps, one of the closest and most outspoken of Sai Baba's devotees. He was also the one person whose intercession was most often sought by Sai Baba's other followers or first time visitors to Shirdi when favours were wanted.

One such visitor was Mrs. Sakharam Aurangabadkar of Sholapur. She had been married for 27 years but despite innumerable vows made to various Gods and Goddesses she had remained childless. As a last resort, she went to Shirdi. She lived there for two months but was never able to get an opportunity to speak to Sai Baba in private. Ultimately, she confided in Shama and asked him to obtain Sai Baba's blessings for her. Shama instructed her to wait in readiness with a dry coconut and joss sticks in the courtyard of the Dwarkamai on a particular evening and await his signal to approach Sai Baba.

On the appointed day, after dinner, Shama was drying Sai Baba's hands with a towel when the latter reached out and affectionately pinched Shama's cheek.

Shama pretended to be angry. "*Deva*! Is it proper for you to pinch me? We don't want a mischievous God who pinches his people!"

"This is the first occasion in the 72 lifetimes that you've been with me that I've pinched you. You resent my touching you, huh?" Sai Baba retorted.

The two men laughed and joked for a while after which Sai Baba sat down in his usual place facing his sacred fire. Shama then signalled Mrs. Aurangabadkar to approach. When the coconut and joss sticks were placed before him, Sai Baba picked up the coconut and shook it so that the dull rattle of the kernel inside could be clearly heard.

"Shama, can you make out what the kernel is saying?" Sai Baba laughed.

"This woman prays that a child should fill her womb the way the kernel fills this coconut," Shama replied quickly. "So give the coconut back to her with your blessings."

"How foolish and fanciful you are," Sai Baba retorted. "Do coconuts bring children?"

"You know what I mean, and I know the power of your blessings — so stop quibbling and give the coconut to her."

The two argued back and forth for some time and, finally, Sai Baba gave in, and returned the coconut to Mrs. Aurangabadkar with the promise of a child.

"But when?" Shama persisted.

"In 12 months' time," Sai Baba answered.

Satisfied with this assurance and knowing that Sai Baba had never failed to keep his word, Shama turned to Mrs. Aurangabadkar.

"Dear lady," he told her, "you are witness to my words. If within 12 months you do not have a child, I promise you I will get another coconut and break it on this God's head and drive him out of this mosque. If I fail to do that, I shall change my name."

The need never arose for Shama to carry out his threat.

However, all those who came to Shirdi were not granted favours just for the asking. Even those closest to Sai Baba were unable to predict how he would react to a particular supplicant. While some were welcomed with old world grace, others were driven away amidst shouting and abuse. Mr. Sapatnekar of Akalkot was one of those who were driven away repeatedly by Sai Baba. This is his story.

Sapatnekar was a lawyer, practising in Akalkot, in Sholapur District. In his student days, one

of the boys in his class had been a young man named Shevde. Some time before the qualifying exams, a group of boys including Sapatnekar and Shevde gathered together to test each other's knowledge in the course of which it was discovered that, of the group, Shevde was the least prepared. All the boys had teased Shevde about the impossibility of his succeeding, but Shevde, who was totally unruffled by the jokes, had assured his friends that he was not worried because Sai Baba had promised him success. Sapatnekar, who was surprised by Shevde's supreme indifference to his co-students' remarks, drew him aside and asked about "this fellow, Sai Baba" in whose word he had such great confidence.

"He is a *fakir* who lives in a mosque in Shirdi," Shevde explained. "He is a great saint. Besides, he is unique. Unless you have accumulated a great store of merit in your earlier lives, you can't even meet him. I believe in him because whatever he's told me has always come true. He has assured me that I will pass the exam and so I am confident that I will."

Sapatnekar laughed at Shevde for depending on Sai Baba's word to see him through a difficult examination.

Ten years later, in 1913, Sapatnekar's only son died. He was inconsolable over the child's death and he sought relief from his pain and grief by going on pilgrimages to Pandharpur, Ganagapur, and other religious centres. Along with his

son, Sapatnekar had lost his peace of mind. No amount of delving into religious scriptures could reconcile him to his loss. One day he remembered what Shevde had told him about Sai Baba. So, Sapatnekar went to Shirdi, accompanied by his younger brother.

Even as he caught his first glimpse of Sai Baba from a distance, Sapatnekar felt a lightness in his heart — a feeling he had not experienced in a long, long time. Later, when he prostrated himself before Sai Baba and placed a coconut at his feet, as an offering, he was thoroughly startled and embarrassed at being told to leave. Fearing that there might have been something improper about the manner of his obeisance and approach, he consulted one of the resident devotees — a man named Bala Shimpi. The latter advised Sapatnekar to purchase a photograph of Sai Baba and after this was done, the two went to the Dwarkamai together. Once again as Sapatnekar tried to prostrate himself before Sai Baba he underwent the humiliation of being told in no uncertain terms to leave the Dwarkamai. As Sapatnekar retreated, he thought he heard the sound of laughter, a sound which was reminiscent of his own derisive and scornful reaction to Shevde.

Sapatnekar returned to Akalkot, but he was more miserable than ever before, and out of desperation he set off on another round of pilgrimages. When nothing worked, he decided to go all the way to Kashi, up north in Uttar Pradesh. But

two days before his departure, his wife had a dream which made him change his plans.

Mrs. Sapatnekar dreamt that she was walking with a pitcher towards a well when she came upon a *fakir* with a piece of cloth tied around his head. He was seated under a margosa tree. He came up to her, and said, "My dear girl, why tire yourself? Give the pitcher to me, I will fill it with pure water." The *fakir* frightened Mrs. Sapatnekar. She ran from him and as he was pursuing her, she awoke.

The Sapatnekars decided that the dream had been a good omen, and both of them set out for Shirdi. Mrs. Sapatnekar who had never seen Sai Baba in the flesh was delighted to recognise him as the *fakir* in her dream and she was graciously received by him. Her husband, however, was once again told to leave the mosque. But this time Sapatnekar was determined to meet Sai Baba alone and seek his forgiveness for his past actions and behaviour. One day Sapatnekar succeeded. As he sat at Sai Baba's feet that day, a shepherdess wandered into the mosque, and Sai Baba started to narrate a tale to her. Sapatnekar was amazed to realise that it was the story of *his* life that Sai Baba was unfolding to the shepherdess. Just as the full import of Sai Baba's omniscience dawned on him, Sapatnekar saw Sai Baba point a finger at him and tell the shepherdess, "This fellow blames me for his son's death. Why does he come and cry in my mosque? Does he think I go around killing people's children? But never

mind about that — what I will do now is bring that very child back to his wife's womb."

Saying this, Sai Baba placed his hand on Sapatnekar's bowed head and promised that his trials would soon be over.

The next day when Sapatnekar went to the mosque to seek Sai Baba's permission to return to Akalkot, Baba gave him a coconut with instructions to wrap it in the upper folds of his wife's sari. "Do as I tell you," he said, "and depart without the least anxiety."

Within a year, a son was born to the Sapatnekars. The child was taken to Shirdi when he was 8 months old. And with Sai Baba's blessings, in course of time, the Sapatnekars had two more boys.

But all those who had spoken ill of Sai Baba or doubted his powers were not accorded the same treatment that was meted out to Sapatnekar. For some unbelieving visitors he would openly perform a miracle to attract them to his mosque, as with the Brahmin doctor who was determined not to do obeisance to a Muslim *fakir*, and to whom Sai Baba manifested himself as Lord Rama. Others, who meant well, but nonetheless had certain reservations, were mildly reproached but in a way they alone could understand.

A pleader from Pandharpur* once went to Shirdi and after prostrating himself before Sai Baba and offering him *dakshina*, settled himself in a corner of the Dwarkamai to observe what was going on around him.

As soon as he sat down, he heard Sai Baba say, "Oh my, how cunning some people can be! They fall at your feet, they offer you *dakshina* but when you aren't there it's a different story. Behind your back, all you get is abuse! Isn't that wonderful?"

Nobody present in the mosque had any idea what Sai Baba was talking about or whom the remarks were meant for.

Later, the pleader from Pandharpur admitted to some of the other devotees that Sai Baba's sarcasm had been aimed at him. He explained that when some years earlier the sub-judge of Pandharpur had come to live in Shirdi to seek Sai Baba's help for his impaired health, various members of the Pandharpur Bar had derided the action of the sub-judge concerned. The pleader admittted that he had been one of those who had participated in the general ribaldry and questioned the propriety of an educated man indulging in such unconventional behaviour.

---

* Pandharpur, on the banks of the Chandrabhaga River, is the biggest place of pilgrimage in Maharashtra State, especially for the followers of the Bhakti ideal. The place is held in reverence for its association with Gnyaneshwar, Tukaram and other poet saints who have sung hymns to the God Vithal.

A well-known characteristic of Sai Baba's (which amply demonstrated his omniscience) was his penchant for narrating, in the first person and in fantastic detail, various events and occurrences which had transpired to bring a man to Shirdi. This was especially so in the case of first time visitors.

Once a Goan gentleman arrived in Shirdi and after prostrating himself before Sai Baba offered him Rs. 35/-. Sai Baba refused the money and, instead, started to tell what at first seemed a meaningless story.

"As I was wandering along the sea shore, I came to a huge mansion and sat on its verandah," he began.

All of Sai Baba's Shirdi devotees knew that since his advent in Shirdi in 1858 he had never ventured out, and Shirdi was miles away from the west coast.

"The owner of the house welcomed me and fed me sumptuously," Sai Baba continued. "He showed me a nice clean place to sleep in — near a cupboard. While I was asleep, a man removed a laterite slab from the wall behind the cupboard and stole Rs. 30,000/- from me. I was greatly distressed. I was certain that it was the cook who had stolen my cash. For a fortnight I could think of nothing except my loss. On the fifteenth day, a wandering *fakir* heard me bemoaning my misfortune and asked me what had happened to cause

me so much sorrow. I told him about the theft."

"'Do as I tell you and you'll recover your money,'" the *fakir* said. "There's another *fakir* whose whereabouts I'll give you. He will get your money back. In the meantime give up your favourite food."

"I followed this advice," Sai Baba told his audience, "and sure enough I got my money back. So I left the mansion and went to the sea shore again. There was a steamer there which was about to sail and I tried to board it but I couldn't get a ticket. Luckily for me, a good natured peon interceded for me and I managed to get aboard. The steamer brought me to another port. There I caught a train and came to the Dwarkamai."

Sai Baba's devotees were mystified beyond words. Everybody knew that Sai Baba had no money, let alone thirty thousand rupees, and that he had never travelled by train, much less by a steamboat.

The Goan gentleman resolved the mystery. It was his story that Sai Baba had unfolded.

"I settled in Goa many years ago and made my fortune there. Our family had a cook who had worked with us for 35 years. Unfortunately the man fell into bad company, and one night he robbed me of all my money. I had exactly thirty thousand in cash which I kept in a cupboard. The cook stole the money in just the way Sai Baba described. He removed a laterite slab from the wall which

formed the back of the cupboard and made off with the money. I spent a fortnight crying and weeping over the loss of my fortune. I made extensive enquiries about the missing cook but nobody knew his whereabouts, or what had happened to the money. Then on the fifteenth day, as I sat on my verandah, a wandering *fakir* came along and asked me why I looked so dejected. I told him about the theft and he, in turn, told me about Sai Baba, the Saint of Shirdi. The *fakir* told me to make a vow to Sai Baba that I would not touch my favourite food till my money had been recovered and I had visited Shirdi. And so I gave up eating rice. Fifteen days after this, my cook turned up at my house, returned all the money to me and begged my forgiveness. I was certain that the *fakir* who had come to my door and who had not been seen again had been none other than Sai Baba himself. But I was so overjoyed by my good fortune that I forgot all about my vow. Sometime thereafter Sai Baba appeared to me in a dream and reminded me about my promise to visit Shirdi. Immediately upon awaking I decided to catch a boat to Bombay from where I could board a train for Shirdi. But I couldn't get a ticket. A peon, whom I had never seen before, spoke to the Captain on my behalf, and I was allowed on board. From Bombay I caught a train. And here I am."

Apart from once again demonstrating Sai Baba's complete knowledge of events and occur-

rences at places far from Shirdi, this episode was just one more in a long line of proofs that when he said, "I draw my man to me from long distances like a sparrow with a string fastened to its leg," it was not idle boasting.

II

A man who has attained self-realisation, a man who is a spiritual Guru, is a man who is not interested in money. Sai Baba asked his devotees for money. Therefore Sai Baba could not be considered a holy man. This piece of logic was a great favourite with Sai Baba's detractors and, in itself, it is good reasoning. But the same rationalists might have arrived at different conclusions had they taken the time and trouble to be as thorough in their investigations as they had been in their reasoning.

The sacred, ancient texts of the Hindus laid down that worship of the Gods was incomplete unless a gold coin formed part of the ritual offerings. It was argued that if a coin was necessary in worshipping a God, it was also necessary when worshipping a saint. Hindu scriptures of a later date therefore stipulated that when calling on a God, king, saint or Guru, one should not go empty-handed; such monetary offerings are known as *dakshina*.

In the early years of his stay in Shirdi, Sai Baba did not ask anything of anyone. If somebody placed a small coin before him, he accepted it and used it to pay for oil for his lamps or to buy tobacco, of which he was very fond. (He always smoked a *bidi* or a *chillum*.) If anything of a denomination larger than a copper one-pice coin was placed before him, he returned it to the donor. After his fame

had spread and people started flocking to the Dwarkamai in large numbers, Sai Baba began to ask for *dakshina;* but the large sums he collected each day were not retained by him. Sai Baba treated the coin of the realm as a means for teaching specific lessons to specific devotees. Every evening the money he had collected during the day was distributed amongst the poor. Every morning Sai Baba was a penniless *fakir*. Obviously, therefore, *dakshina* was not collected by Sai Baba to accumulate wealth or buy properties or build ashrams. Nor was he a later-day Robin Hood who took only from the rich in order to give to the poor. His demands for *dakshina* gave every impression of being indiscriminate. It often happened that when he asked for a certain sum of money from a devotee he was not asking for money at all; for instance, if he asked a follower (when he knew to have no money on him) for two rupees, he was in fact asking for the twin coins of faith and patience. It must be emphasised that Sai Baba did not ask for money from all who went to him. There were innumerable occasions when he even refused large sums which were voluntarily offered. His explanation for such rejections was that he only asked "those whom the *Fakir* (God) points out to me". Time and again he was also heard to say that he had to "give back a hundred times what is received".

The famous Marathi actor Ganpatrao Bodas has recorded in his autobiography that on one occasion Sai Baba kept on demanding money from him till he had emptied his purse; and the result

was that in later life he never lacked for money. It came his way in abundance.

S. B. Dhumal, a lawyer devotee of Sai Baba's, on a visit to Shirdi, was once repeatedly asked for money till he had handed over three hundred rupees — the exact amount of the fee he had charged to some of Baba's other devotees for a law suit he had handled on their behalf.

Sai Baba always knew when people came to him determined to give only if asked. No demands were ever made of such. Sometimes Sai Baba would accept only a part of what was offered to him and return the balance explaining that he had taken "only what was due". Invariably, the latter was a long forgotten vow or promise, and not necessarily one made to him.

The significance and symbolism of Sai Baba's asking for *dakshina* are perhaps best illustrated by the following recorded experiences of his devotees.

Two gentlemen from Goa arrived at the Dwarkamai. Baba asked one of them for fifteen rupees. The amount was handed over and graciously accepted. The second gentleman offered thirty-five rupees, unasked, but the money was refused*. As other devotees present in the mosque speculated upon this rejection, Sai Baba narrated to them the story of the man from whom he had accepted money.

---

* See story on page 46.

"He was poor at first, and he had pledged his first pay to God. Soon he got a job which paid him fifteen rupees a month. He did well in it and he was given successive promotions. First, his salary was doubled to thirty, then to sixty. Then it became a hundred, then two hundred; finally he was earning seven hundred a month. But, in his prosperity, he forgot his vow. His *karma* has brought him to Shirdi, and I've just collected the fifteen rupees which he owed."

When Sai Baba had finished his story, the gentleman from Goa recalled his long forgotten vow to God Datta, and confirmed that Sai Baba's narration was accurate in every detail and that his first pay (Rs. 15/-) had indeed been pledged in the manner described. What Sai Baba had collected from him was payment of an old debt.

Ruttonji Shapurji Wadia was a rich Parsi merchant, who lived in the town of Nanded. Ruttonji, who had amassed a fortune, was a charitable man. He was liberal with his money, especially when it came to helping the poor and the needy. The only lack in Ruttonji's life was a child. When he heard about Sai Baba, he hastened to Shirdi. After garlanding Baba with flowers and presenting him with a basket of fruit, Ruttonji sought his blessings. Sai Baba asked Ruttonji for five rupees but before the money could be handed over he said, "Give me only one rupee and two annas as you've already given me three-fourteen." Ruttonji was bewildered, but did as he was told. This was Ruttonji's very first

visit to Shirdi and his first meeting with Sai Baba. How could Sai Baba claim to have received three rupees and fourteen annas from him? After receiving Sai Baba's assurance that he would be blessed with a son, Ruttonji went back to Nanded. Some days after his return, Ruttonji was going through his accounts when he realised what Sai Baba had meant when he claimed that he had already received Rs. 3-14-0 from him. That was the exact amount Ruttonji had spent on a reception he had hosted for Moulisaheb — a holy man who was well-known to the people of Nanded — just a few days before his trip to Shirdi.

A devotee's physical presence in Shirdi was not essential for Sai Baba to make him fulfil a pledge. As Sai Baba often said to himself, he was "not confined to this three-and-a-half cubits body" which dwelt in Shirdi.

What happened to Appasaheb Kulkarni of Thana is typical of happenings experienced by other devotees.

Kulkarni was a God-fearing man. He had not heard of Sai Baba but when a friend presented him with a picture of the Saint of Shirdi, he worshipped it daily with offerings of flowers and sandal paste. Once Kulkarni's work required him to visit Bhiwandi for a week. On the third day of his absence, a *fakir* turned up at Kulkarni's house. He looked exactly like the saint whose picture Kulkarni worshipped, and this prompted Mrs. Kulkarni to enquire if he was Sai Baba of Shirdi.

The fakir replied that he was not, but that he was Sai Baba's obedient servant, and had been sent to enquire after the family's health. The *fakir* asked Mrs. Kulkarni for *dakshina,* whereupon she gave him a rupee. In exchange, the *fakir* gave Mrs. Kulkarni a packet of *udhi* (ash from Sai Baba's sacred fire in the Dwarkamai) with instructions to keep it alongside Baba's photograph. That afternoon Appasaheb Kulkarni returned home. He had been unable to proceed with his tour as his horse had taken ill. When his wife told him of the visit of the fakir who resembled Sai Baba, Kulkarni was most upset. It was bad enough that he had missed meeting the *fakir,* he felt that his wife should have given more than a rupee as *dakshina.* At least ten, he thought. Kulkarni rushed out of the house in search of the morning's visitor. It was a vain quest. Much later in the day, when Kulkarni went out again with a friend, he encountered the *fakir.* Before Kulkarni could utter a word, the *fakir* thrust out his palm and asked for money. Kulkarni gave him a rupee. The *fakir* made two more demands, and each time Kulkarni gave him a rupee. When more money was demanded, a very embarrassed Kulkarni had to borrow three rupees from his friend. Still the *fakir* was not satisfied. Kulkarni thereupon asked the *fakir* to accompany him to his house. There Kulkarni gave the *fakir* another three rupees which was all he had in change. When the *fakir* made yet another demand Kulkarni produced a tenner. The *fakir* accepted it and gave back to Kulkarni the nine rupees he had received from him.

This episode is of two-fold significance. The *fakir's* repeated demands for money till he had received the sum of exactly ten rupees — the amount Kulkarni had thought his wife should have given — was typical of Sai Baba. What is to be noted here is that, having decided upon this amount as *dakshina*, Kulkarni ought to have taken the trouble to make certain that he had the money on him when he set out in search of the *fakir*. Since he had not done so, he was taught a lesson in humility by being made to borrow at least part of the money from someone else. When the *fakir* returned the nine rupees in change to Kulkarni, the now consecrated coins were symbolical of Sai Baba's acknowledgement of Kulkarni's devotion to him — devotion of nine types* as listed in the religious scriptures of the Hindus.

When Sai Baba repeatedly asked a Bombay devotee, Mrs. Tarkhad, for a sum of six rupees as *dakshina*, though he knew she had no money on her, the lady was both pained and embarrassed until her husband explained to her that it was not cash which Sai Baba was demanding of her, but surrender of the six inner enemies — lust, anger, pride, greed, envy and covetousness. Sai Baba, who overheard the explanation, agreed.

Haribhau Karnik of Dahanu, on a visit to Shirdi in 1917, had already obtained Baba's permission to leave when it occurred to him to offer

---

* **Sravana, Kirtana, Smarana, Padasevana, Archana, Namaskara, Dasya, Sakhya and Atmanivedana.**

one more rupee by way of *dakshina.* As he tried to do so, another devotee informed him that as he had already been granted permission to leave, he should not approach Baba again. On his journey back to Dahanu, Karnik stopped at the Kala Rama temple in Nasik. No sooner had Karnik stepped inside than the Maharaj of the temple grabbed him by the wrist and said, "Give me my one rupee." Karnik paid the money willingly. The incident convinced him that Sai Baba had known about his last minute wish, and this was his way of obtaining the rupee Karnik had wanted to give him.

All these stories, and many more like them, clearly indicate that Sai Baba's asking for *dakshina* was not for reasons of personal gain or even due to any interest in money *per se.* It was either a purely symbolic demand, as in the case of Mrs. Tarkhad; or a reminder of an unfulfilled pledge, as with the visitor from Goa; or a lesson in humility, as taught to Appasaheb Kulkarni; or to teach his followers that all spiritual teachers are on a par, as conveyed to Ruttonji Wadia of Nanded; or to indicate to a devotee that even unspoken intentions are known to a Guru, as with Haribhau Karnik.

From the thousands of rupees which flowed into Shirdi each month, Sai Baba set aside a small sum to buy tobacco for himself, oil for his lamps

and fuel for his sacred fire. The ash (*udhi*) from this sacred fire was collected and stored in gunny-sacks and fistfuls of it were distributed by him as *prasad* to devotees at the time of leaving Shirdi.

There was a verse about *udhi* which Sai Baba often sang:

> *Ramte Ram aoji aoji;*
> *Udhiya ke guniya laoji.**

The *udhi* from Baba's sacred fire was of dual significance. On the spiritual level, the dispensation of *udhi* by Sai Baba was a symbolical reminder to his devotees that in the final analysis all the visible phenomena of his world were as transient as the ash and that, therefore, his followers should learn to distinguish between the real and the illusory. On the material level, the dispensation of *udhi* represented the conferment of good health, prosperity and other worldly benefits. Sai Baba's *udhi* however, was most prized for its curative powers.

Since the sphere in which Baba's phenomenal powers were most lavishly displayed was in the curing of diseases, devotees who were not in Shirdi when such help was required depended upon the *udhi* to work miraculous cures.

The following is one of the best-known and,

---

* Welcome, welcome, playful Ram, And bring along sackfuls of udhi.

certainly, the strangest of stories about how Sai Baba's *udhi* helped one of his devotees.

Sometime around 1904 the daughter of Baba's follower, Nanasaheb Chandorkar, was undergoing a very difficult delivery and had been in labour for more than 48 hours. As the situation deteriorated, Nanasaheb mentally invoked Sai Baba's help. At the time, Nanasaheb was stationed at Jamner, in the Khandesh District, as a Mamlatdar. Shirdi was more than a hundred miles away. While Nanasaheb prayed in Jamner, a different set of events were unfolding in Shirdi. Ramgirbuva, one of Sai Baba's resident devotees at Shirdi, suddenly took it into his head to return to his hometown, Jalgaon (also in Khandesh District), and sought Baba's permission to leave. Baba granted him permission to leave but advised him to stop at Jamner as he wanted him to deliver some *udhi* to Nanasaheb. Ramgirbuva was hesitant about this undertaking as he had just enough money for his rail fare to Jalgaon, and Jamner was another 30 miles away. Sai Baba assured him that everything would be taken care of. In addition to the *udhi*, Sai Baba sent to Nanasaheb the words of a well-known devotional song.

With unquestioning obedience, Ramgirbuva set off from Shirdi. When he reached Jalgaon it was 2.45 in the morning, and he had exactly two annas left. He was wondering how he would get to Jamner when to his great relief he heard a voice

in the dark ask, "Who is Ramgirbuva from Shirdi?" He turned to find that the enquiry had been made by a well-dressed driver of a private carriage drawn by a pair of magnificent horses. Assuming that the transport had been provided by Nanasaheb, Ramgirbuva drove off. Shortly before daybreak the driver stopped to water the horses and laid out a fine breakfast for Ramgirbuva. Then they set off again and reached Jamner. Ramgirbuva asked the driver to stop as he wanted to relieve himself, and moved away from the road. When Ramgirbuva returned to the spot at which he had alighted he was surprised to find the carriage and its driver gone. He went into town on foot and, asking the way, reached Nanasaheb's house. As he handed over Baba's *udhi* and the text of the *aarati* to Nanasaheb, he gathered that the Mamlatdar's daughter was in a grave condition. Nanasaheb issued immediate instructions to his wife to give the girl a bit of *udhi* in water and to sing Baba's *aarati*. Within minutes a grandchild was born to Nanasaheb, and his daughter was declared out of danger by those in attendance. Ramgirbuva was pleased that his mission had been timely as well as successful. He thanked Nanasaheb for sending his man with carriage and pair, to say nothing of such a fine breakfast, as otherwise he might still have been stranded thirty miles away. Nanasaheb was startled. He had sent nobody to Jalgaon for the simple reason that he had not known of Ramgirbuva's impending visit. Despite the extensive enquiries which were

subsequently made, nobody was ever able to explain Ramgirbuva's adventure.

There is another strange story involving *udhi*. In this case, the cure which was effected was experienced by a man who as far as is known, was not even a follower of Sai Baba.

Narayan Motiram Jani was a Sai Baba devotee who lived in Nasik. On Sai Baba's advice he had left service and started a boarding-house called "Anandashrâm". One day, a boarder was stung by a scorpion. Jani immediately ran to his own room in search of Sai Baba's *udhi* as he, along with hundreds of others, had full faith in its curative powers. In his haste and anxiety, Jani was unable to find his store of *udhi* whereupon he invoked Sai Baba's help and took a pinch of ash from the joss stick burning in front of Baba's picture. This ash he pressed against the spot where the scorpion had stung the boarder, and the moment Jani withdrew his finger the boarder was astonished to find that his pain had vanished.

Sai Baba himself seldom used the *udhi* from his sacred fire for effecting cures. Epilepsy, bubonic plague, Guinea worm, tuberculosis and a host of other painful and (in those days) incurable diseases were healed by his mere look or touch. Raging fevers abated, labour pains subsided, kidney stones dissolved and snake bites and scorpion stings were rendered harmless. The blind were able to see and the paralysed were able to walk. So many and so

varied were the cures experienced by his devotees that it is impossible to catalogue them all.

Often the treatment prescribed by him was unorthodox and downright unscientific. For instance, the application of powdered *beeba* nuts* to inflamed eyes is not a medication any doctor would be willing to prescribe. But Sai Baba did just that, and the bizarre remedy worked.

In 1909, Bhimaji Patil — a friend of Nanasaheb Chandorkar — contracted tuberculosis. When every then known remedy had failed, Bhimaji wrote to Nanasaheb about his plight. Nanasaheb's response, predictably, was to suggest a trip to Shirdi. Bhimaji was taken to Shirdi, carried to the Dwarkamai and placed before Sai Baba. The latter declined to be of help. Bhimaji's suffering, he explained, was on account of evil *karma* in a previous birth. When Bhimaji heard this, he cried out in despair and begged for help. This appeal did not go unheeded.

"Stay then and put all your anxieties aside," Baba told him. "Your pain will be ended." From the moment this promise was made, Bhimaji stopped coughing blood. During his stay in Shirdi, Bhimaji had two dreams. In the first dream Bhimaji saw himself as a boy being subjected to a painful flogging for not reciting poetry before his class teacher. In the second dream, an unidentified individual rolled a large stone up and down

---

* Carpus Anacardium. Commonly known as marking nuts.

his chest, causing him to feel severe pain. What is to be noted is that after the physical distress suffered by Bhimaji in these two dreams, he was completely cured of tuberculosis.

Another devotee, Bala Ganpat Shimpi, was cured of malaria by taking Sai Baba's advice to "feed a black dog with rice and curds near the Laxmi temple".

Sai Baba saved the Nagpur millionaire Bapusaheb Booty from death by cholera by recommending to him a mixture of almonds, walnuts and pista boiled in sugared milk — ordinarily a course of action certain to lead to a fatal aggravation of the disease.

There were also occasions when Sai Baba prescribed nothing at all. A wide variety of ailments ranging from longstanding stomach disorders to ear troubles where even surgical intervention had not succeeded, were cured merely by his saying "*Allah achchaa Karega**".

When Sai Baba said, "I suffer for my devotees," it was not a hollow claim.

Mrs. Dadasaheb Kharpade of Amraoti was in Shirdi on a visit with her young son. After a few days' stay the boy started to run a high fever and was stricken with bubonic plague. As soon as the disease was identified, the frightened mother ran to seek Sai Baba's permission to leave Shirdi so that

* God will cure it.

the child could receive proper medical attention. Sai Baba spoke gently to her. He said, "Though the sky is darkened by clouds, they will pass, and all will be clear." He then lifted up his robe, and all present were able to see four egg-sized bubos on his body. Sai Baba had, literally, taken the killer disease away from the child and onto his own person.

When the sister-in-law of Madhavrao Deshpande, Sai Baba's constant companion in Shirdi, was stricken by the same disease, an *overnight* cure was effected by application of *udhi* to the bubos and by giving the patient a pinch of the sacred ash mixed in water.

When pain or suffering was the outcome of a debit balance of *karma* in a previous birth (as was the case with Bhimaji), Sai Baba resorted to bizarre methods for effecting cures.

There was a medical practitioner by the name of Pillay who was a great follower of Baba's. The doctor however suffered much from Guinea worm. He was so immobilised by pain that he sent Baba a message through another devotee (Kakasaheb Dixit) that although he knew that his present suffering was in repayment of past *karma*, he would prefer death to the agony he was going through. Could not Sai Baba use his phenomenal powers to ease his pain by spreading out the repayment of the past *karma* over ten future lifetimes?

When this message was conveyed to Sai Baba, he said to Dixit, "Tell him to be fearless. Why does

he want to suffer for ten lifetimes when he can work out the consequences of his past actions in ten days? Am I not here to look after the temporal as well as spiritual welfare of my people that he should pray for death? Have him carried to the mosque on somebody's back, and let's get to work so that his suffering can be ended once and for all."

The doctor was brought to the Dwarkamai and seated on Baba's right.

"Lie down and relax," Baba told him. "The results of past actions have to be suffered but place your faith in God and He will take care of you. Now remove that bandage from your leg or else you will die. Soon a crow will come along and peck at you. After that you will be fine."

While Pillay, Dixit and others discussed *karma* and reincarnation, Abdul, the sweeper boy, whose job it was to keep the Dwarkamai clean and to trim the oil lamps burning in the mosque, walked towards the seated group. Suddenly the mosque reverberated with Pillay's screams of pain. Abdul had accidentally stepped on the doctor's outstretched leg and, as a result of the pressure, seven worms had been squeezed out from the affected area of Pillay's leg. After a few minutes Pillay's pain subsided, and he asked Baba when he could expect "the crow" who was to peck at his leg.

"But didn't you see him?" Baba retorted. "Abdul was the crow, and he won't come this way again. Now go home and rest, and all will be well."

By alluding to the sweeper-boy Abdul as "the crow", Sai Baba was pinpointing to his devotees the shortcomings inherent in communal prejudice. It was the action of a Muslim, moreover one who worked as a sweeper (the lowest of the low in the Hindu caste structure), which had helped cure Pillay of a painful affliction.

It may be added that Dr. Pillay was permanently rid of the disease in exactly ten days simply by applying *udhi* to his leg.

When Sai Baba promised his devotees "protection", the assurance was not restricted to rendering help only after misfortune struck. The following incident, witnessed by Annasaheb Dabholkar on one of his early visits to Shirdi, was an impressive enough display of Sai Baba's powers to inspire him to undertake the writing of his monumental work, the *Sai Satcharita*. This incident, reproduced here in its entirety, reveals that when Sai Baba spoke about "looking after" his devotees, his commitment was absolue.

"One morning, some time soon after the year 1910, while I was in Shirdi, I went to see Sai Baba at his mosque. On reaching there, I was surprised to find him making preparations for grinding an extraordinary quantity of wheat. After arranging a gunnysack on the floor, he placed a hand-operated flour mill on it and rolling up the sleeves of his robe he started grinding the wheat. I wondered about this, as I knew that Baba owned nothing, stored nothing and lived on alms. Others who had

come to see him wondered about this too, but nobody had the temerity to ask any questions. As the news spread through the village, more and more men and women collected at the mosque to find out what was going on. Four of the women in the watching crowd forced their way through and, pushing Baba to one side, grabbed the handle of the flour mill. Baba was enraged by this officiousness but, as the women raised their voices in devotional songs, their love and regard for him became so evident that Baba forgot his anger and smiled.

"As the women worked, they too wondered what Baba intended doing with such an enormous quantity of floor. Like everybody else in Shirdi, they knew that Baba owned no houses or property, had no family to support and, since he lived on alms, he did not need the flour for himself. They concluded that Baba, being the kind of man he was, would probably distribute the flour between the four of them. Had he not smiled upon them when they took the hard work of grinding away from him? When their work was done, they divided the flour into four portions, and each of them started to take away what she considered her share.

" 'Ladies, are you gone mad!' Baba shouted. 'Whose property are you looting? Your fathers'? Have I borrowed any wheat from you? What gives you the right to take this flour away?'

" 'Now listen to me,' he continued in a calmer tone as the women stood dumbfounded before him.

'Take this flour and sprinkle it along the village boundaries.'

"The four women, who were feeling thoroughly embarrssed by this time, whispered amongst themselves for a few moments, and then set out in different directions to carry out Baba's instructions.

"Since I was witness to this incident, I was naturally curious as to what it signified, and I questioned several people in Shirdi about it. I was told that there was a cholera epidemic in the village, and this was Baba's antidote to it. It was not the grains of wheat which had been put through the mill but cholera itself which had been crushed by Sai Baba, and cast out from the village of Shirdi. I began to ask myself what earthly connection could exist between the grinding of wheat and the eradication of an epidemic of cholera. There was, of course, none. The whole thing was inexplicable. That was when I first thought of writing about Sai Baba's life and his many miracles."

Sai Baba lived in Shirdi for sixty years and he used to grind wheat each day — though not on the scale mentioned in the story narrated above — and many of his devotees attached a philosophical significance to his activity.

Since Sai Baba was firmly of the view that self-knowledge, or self-realisation, was impossible without first ridding oneself of impulses, desires, and *ahankara*, it has been suggested that Baba's daily ritual of grinding wheat was symbolic of his

wiping out these impediments in his devotees' quest for self-realisation. It was theorised that the upper and lower stones of Baba's flour mill stood for *bhakti* and *karma*, while the handle for turning the stones represented *jnana*.

This theory is reminiscent of a story about Kabir. Once, seeing a woman grinding corn, Kabir wept and said to his Guru, "I feel the agony of being crushed under the wheel of worldly existence — like the corn in this mill."

"Be not afraid," the Guru consoled. "Hold fast to the handle of knowledge, as I do. Do not wander far from it but turn inwards to the centre, and you are sure to be saved."

III

There are men of religion who leave their homes and loved ones to live in the solitude of forests, caves or hermitages. They lead isolated lives and are absorbed in themselves. Sai Baba, though he had no family of his own, had elected to dwell amongst people and to conduct his day-to-day life like any other householder. He taught by action as well as words, and strove constantly for the welfare of others.

A real Guru plays the role of a helmsman, and ferries his disciples across the ocean of worldly existence. Sai Baba was one such Guru, though his methods of teaching were unique and, often, unorthodox.

Though Sai Baba himself was a *siddha*, he was so unpretentious that in order to demonstrate to his followers how a disciple should behave towards a Guru, he once played the role of a *sadhaka*. This is how it happened.

Shortly after Sai Baba had made Shirdi his home, a *fakir* from Ahmednagar arrived in nearby Rahata with a group of disciples. The *fakir's* name was Javhar Ali and he lived in spacious surroundings near the Virabhadra temple. Javhar Ali was a learned man (he could recite the entire Koran) and he had a honeyed tongue. As soon as he had established himself at Rahata, he started work on the construction of an Idga wall — before which Mohammedans pray on Id. Since the wall was

coming up too close to the Virabhadra temple for the liking of the Hindu inhabitants of Rahata, a quarrel arose and matters deteriorated to such an extent that Javhar Ali thought it prudent to leave Rahata. He therefore came to Shirdi and started to live in the Dwarkamai. People were impressed by his great learning and his sweet talk. Javhar Ali was so confident of himself that after a while he started referring to Sai Baba as a disciple of his. Baba showed no resentment on his score and even consented to serve Javhar Ali in many ways. When the latter suggested returning to Rahata to live there, Sai Baba agreed to accompany him. Baba's devotees in Shirdi disapproved of this move and, one day, they went to Rahata in a deputation to bring him back to Shirdi. This was to prove disastrous for Javhar Ali. Sai Baba's devotees took Javhar Ali to Devidas, a holy man of Shirdi who lived in the Maruti temple and with whom Sai Baba had conversed on many a subject during his early days there. In the course of the ensuing debate on spiritual matters between Devidas and Javhar Ali, the latter came out such a poor second that he fled Shirdi. He went to live in Bijapur, and it was only many years later that he returned to Shirdi and prostrated himself at Sai Baba's feet.

By agreeing to serve as Javhar Ali's disciple, Sai Baba had only given his followers a practical demonstration in humility. By his own example, Sai Baba had taught his devotees what constitutes proper conduct towards one's Guru.

Sai Baba often likened the relationship between Guru and disciple to that of a female tortoise and her young. The tortoise gives neither milk nor warmth to her progeny. Her keeping a loving eye on them from a distance is sustenance enough.

The attainment of self-realisation is the goal of every spiritual aspirant. And, as with everything else, the method advocated by Sai Baba for achieving this end was unique. Devotees who found it difficult to focus their thoughts on God as a formless, metaphysical entity were advised to concentrate upon *him*. This practice, Sai Baba explained, would gradually result in eliminating the distinction between the meditator, the act of meditating and the object meditated upon, and lead the meditator to be merged in the *Brahma*.

Sai Baba had no special time or place for teaching his devotees. Whenever the occasion demanded, Baba imparted instruction to those around him. His precepts were not only varied but tailored to the needs of individual devotees, as will be seen from the following story.

Radhabai Deshmukh was an elderly woman devotee, who, in the course of a visit to Shirdi, decided that she could attain the spiritual goal of her life only if Sai Baba taught her some *mantra*. In order to "persuade" him to do so, she undertook a fast unto death. When three days had passed without the old lady touching a morsel of food or a drop of water, Baba's devotee, Madhavrao Deshpande, decided to intervene. He was worried that

the obstinate old woman might die, and people would blame Sai Baba for it. At his instance, Baba sent for Radhabhai.

"Oh, *mai** why are you subjecting yourself to these tortures and courting death?" he asked. "Listen to what I have to say — it is my own story I'm telling you."

"I had a Guru who was a great and merciful saint. I served him for a long time, and yet he would not teach me any *mantra*. I wanted never to leave him, and was determined to receive some instruction from him. But my Guru, you see, had his own method of teaching. I asked him for guidance and he, in reply, asked me for two pice. Why, you might ask, was a perfect being like my Guru interested in money? But it wasn't the two pice which my Guru wanted from me. It was *faith* and *patience* which he asked for. And he was pleased when I gave these to him. I was with my Guru for 12 years. He brought me up, he fed me and clothed me. How do I describe the love of a rare Guru like him? Whenever I looked at him, he seemed deep in meditation. Night and day I gazed upon him without thinking of even food or drink. My mind was always fixed upon him. He was my sole refuge, and without him I felt restless. I waited patiently upon my Guru, and I served him for many years. My Guru never asked anything of me. Not only did he never neglect me, he protected me at all times. Whether I lived with him, or away from him, I

* Sai Baba addressed all women as "mother"; and men as **Kaka** (uncle, specifically father's brother), **Bapu** (father) or **Bhau** (brother).

could always feel his love. My Guru never taught me *mantra*, so how can I teach you any? Don't waste your time trying to obtain *mantra*. Just make me the sole object of your thoughts, and you will attain your spiritual goal. Turn to me, and I shall look after you."

Radhabai Deshmukh broke her fast, and returned to her native Sangamner convinced of the superfluity of *mantra* in the quest for self-realisation.

Seated beside his sacred fire in the Dwarkamai, Sai Baba regaled his audiences with dozens of stories to illumine his teachings. Unfortunately, only a few have been recorded.

One doctrine Sai Baba repeatedly impressed upon his followers was the importance of treating all people with courtesy and respect. He was firmly of the opinion that people's paths did not cross unless they had been connected in a previous birth and that the nature of every relationship depended upon the merits and demerits accumulated in earlier incarnations. Sai Baba also told his followers that kindness and consideration were not to be confined to human beings. Birds and animals were as important. To emphasise the importance of this precept, he once narrated the following tale.

"One morning I was strolling along till I came to a river bank. As I was tired I decided to rest for

a while and bathe my hands and feet. There was a gentle breeze blowing, and as I prepared to smoke a *chillum* I heard a frog croak. A passing traveller came and joined me. He too heard the croaking of the frog. I told him that the frog was in trouble, and was tasting the bitter fruit of its own actions in an earlier life. We reap in this life the fruit of what is sown in the past life, and there is no point in weeping over it. When my companion said he wished to see for himself what was happening, I told him that he'd find that the frog had been caught by a snake. He returned within minutes to report that such was indeed the case, and that in another 10 or 12 minutes the frog would be eaten up by the snake which had caught it.

" 'That cannot be,' I told him. 'I'm its protector. Come and see how I free it.'

"We walked together to the bank of the river. 'Oh, Veerbhadrappa,' I told the snake, 'hasn't your enemy Bassappa suffered enough by being born a frog? And you, though born a serpent, still maintain enmity towards him? Shame on you! Now give up your hatred and live in peace.' On hearing these words, the snake released the frog immediately and slithered out of sight.

"Naturally my companion was most surprised by all this, and he wanted to know about Veerbhadrappa and Bassappa. Who were they and what was the cause of their enmity? We shared a *chillum* as I unravelled the mystery to him.

"Years ago there was a holy place some 4 to 5 miles from where I lived. The place was holy because upon it stood a temple to Mahadev. Since the temple was old and dilapidated, the people of the surrounding area collected contributions for repairs and renovations. After a large sum was collected, a local man of standing was entrusted with the money. He undertook to oversee the work and keep proper accounts. But the man was miserly as well as crooked. Part of the temple building funds went into his own pocket, and hardly any progress was made on the work of renovating the temple. The miser was very good at offering plausible explanations for the delays and, therefore, more money was raised by the local people. This money too was handed over to the miser, but the renovation work remained at a standstill. One night Mahadev appeared to the miser's wife in a dream and instructed her to have the temple dome rebuilt. He promised to give her a hundred times whatever she spent on having this work done. When the wife mentioned this dream to the miser, he pooh-poohed the whole thing.

"A few days later the miser's wife had a second dream. This time Mahadev told her not to ask her husband for money but to do something, however little, for the temple from her *own* money. On waking up, the wife decided to donate her jewellery to the temple. The miser was thoroughly dismayed by his wife's decision. As he was unable to persuade his wife to change her mind, he undervalued the ornaments, whereby their actual worth was re-

duced to a thousand rupees. He then purchased the jewellery for himself but instead of paying the temple priest for it in cash he donated a piece of land to the temple in his wife's name. The miser did not own this land. It had been mortgaged to him for only Rs. 200/- by a poor woman named Dubaki who, because of adverse circumstances, had not been able to redeem it, and possession of the land was given to the impoverished temple priest.

"Soon thereafter, the miser's house was hit by lightning, and both husband and wife were killed. In his next life, the rich miser was born into a poor Brahmin family at Mathura, and he was named Veerbhadrappa. His wife was reborn as the daughter of the temple priest to whom the land had been gifted by the miser, and she was known as Gouri. The woman Dubaki, whose mortgaged land the miser had given away, was reborn as the son of another functionary in the same Mahadev temple, and in his incarnation was named Chenbassappa.

"The temple priest was a friend of mine, and we often sat and talked over a *chillum*. The girl Gouri was also devoted to me. As she grew older the priest was anxious to find a husband for her. I told him not to worry as the bridegroom would himself seek her out. One day, Veerbhadrappa came to the priest's door begging for bread. He stayed on and, in course of time, with my consent, Veerbhadrappa and Gouri were married. For a short while, Veerbhadrappa too was devoted to me

but it soon became apparent that even in this life he hankered after money. On account of an unexpected demand, the land which had been gifted to the temple priest increased in value, and fetched exactly a hundred times the price Gouri's miser husband in his previous life had placed on her jewellery. All concerned agreed that the land should be sold, but a dispute arose as to who should get the money. I was of the opinion that the property belonged to God and was vested in the temple priest. Since Gouri was her father's sole heir, Veerbhadrappa had no rights whatsoever, and no portion of the money could be spent by him, or anybody else, without her consent. As was to be expected, Veerbhadrappa was furious. He also accused me of attempting to embezzle his wife's money. Gouri sought my forgiveness for her husband's accusations, and I assured her that if she ever needed my help I would cross the seven seas to help her.

"That night Mahadev appeared to Gouri in a dream. 'The money is all yours,' he said to her. 'Spend some of it on the temple in consultation with Chenbassappa. If you want to use the rest for any other purpose, consult Baba in the *masjid*.' When Gouri told me about her dream, I advised her to retain the capital for herself but share the interest with Chenbassappa. Veerbhadrappa, I told her, had nothing whatever to do with it. As we were talking, Veerbhadrappa and Chenbassappa turned up. They had been quarrelling. When I told them about Gouri's dream, Veerbhadrappa got into a worse rage, and even threatened to cut Chen

bassappa to pieces if he touched a penny of his wife's money. Chenbassappa, who was timid by nature, caught hold of my feet, and begged me to save him from Veerbhadrappa's rage. I promised always to protect him from his enemy's wrath. Veerbhadrappa, after his death, was reborn a snake, and Chenbassappa a frog.

"A little while ago I heard Chenbassappa's croaks for help and, as promised, I saved him from Veerbhadrappa.

Apart from illustrating the necessity for kindness to one's fellow beings and the obvious moral that greed for money can drag a man down to the lowest level and bring about his destruction, this story clearly shows that Sai Baba subscribed to the theory of reincarnation.

To drive the lesson home to his devotees Sai Baba once purchased two goats. The animals were selected by him from a passing herd. What angered his devotees was that he had paid an outrageously high price for them. Goats were than available at prices ranging from Rs. 2/- per head to Rs. 4/- per head. Baba had paid Rs. 32/- for the pair. Apart from the affection which he lavished upon this pair of goats, Baba also spent money on feeding them. It was only after the goats had been returned to their owner that Sai Baba gave his followers an explanation for this seemingly bizarre behaviour.

"You think I have been a fool to pay what I did for the goats? No, listen to my story. In their former lives these goats were human beings. They were blood brothers, and they were my companions. The older of the two was a lazy fellow, while the younger brother was active and earned a lot of money. This led to jealousy and resentment on the part of the elder brother. The two of them forgot that they were brothers and they quarrelled constantly. They became implacable enemies, and one day the two of them had a big fight. The older boy hit his brother on the head with a thick stick while the younger, simultaneously, struck back with an axe. Both fell down dead. As a result of their actions, they were reborn as goats. I recognised them as they were going by, and recalling their past I took pity on them. That's why I spent money on feeding them and giving them some rest and comfort."

Sai Baba was clearly of the opinion that mere book learning and the study of religious scriptures were not the means for attaining self-realisation. A Guru was essential — to act as guide and show the way.

Sai Baba's devotee Kakasaheb Dixit has recorded that on one occasion when he called at the Dwarkamai to seek Baba's permission to leave

Shirdi, another devotee present at the time, asked, "Where does one go?"

"High up," replied Sai Baba.

"And how about the way?"

"There are many ways," Baba explained. "There is one from here (Shirdi) too. But it is a difficult path — there are wolves and tigers in the jungles."

'But what if we take a guide along?" asked Kakasaheb Dixit.

"Then there should be no difficulty," Baba affirmed. "The guide will take you to your destination and you will avoid the many pitfalls on the way."

An apocryphal story Sai Baba told about himself indicates the importance he attached to the necessity for a Guru.

"Once, myself and three friends were discussing religious scriptures and how to attain realisation. One said that we ought not to depend on anyone but should raise ourselves by our own efforts. The second man felt that the way to do it was by control over the mind. The third said that since the world is always changing and only the formless was eternal, we should be able to distinguish the real from the unreal. The fourth, that's myself, said that book learning is worthless. We should do our duty and surrender ourselves body

and mind to an all-pervading Guru. But in order to do so, strong and limitless faith was necessary.

"The four of us started to wander through a forest in quest of God. My three friends were determined to find Him with their intellect. Along the way, we met a *vanjari* who enquired of us where and how far we were going and whether we were in search of anything. We replied, evasively, that we were merely wandering around. He warned us against the dangers of such aimless wandering and advised us to take a guide along. He also invited us to rest a while and share his meal, but we refused the offer. The forest was so vast and the trees grew so tall and thick that, in fact, we did get lost, and it was quite by chance that we found ourselves back at the spot where we had met the *vanjari*. He was still there, and once again he offered to share his food with us and warned us against the dangers of wandering through a jungle without a seasoned guide. My three friends who were obstinate fellows, rejected the good man's offer, nor were they inclined to accept his advice against wandering off on their own. I alone thought differently. I was hungry and thirsty, and much moved by this kin stranger's offer of food and drink. Though the *vanjari* was an illiterate man, belonging to a low caste, he had shown true enlightenment by his kindness and hospitality. I accepted a loaf of bread from him and drank some water. By such acceptance, I felt that I had taken the first step towards self-realisation. And then I saw the Guru! He stood before us and asked what we had

been arguing about. I told him of all that had happened. 'Would you like to come with me?' the Guru asked. 'I will show you what you want but only he who believes in my word will succeed.' My friends refused the offer, and left. I alone bowed to him and accepted his terms. He took me to a well, tied my feet up with a rope and hung me, head down from the branch of a nearby tree. I hung upside down, three feet from the water, without being able to touch it. Leaving me suspended in this fashion, the Guru went away and returned after four or five hours. Pulling me out of the well and untying me, he asked me how I felt. 'It was pure bliss,' I answered. 'How does a fool like me describe such a joyous experience?' The Guru was delighted by my reply and drawing me close to him he embraced me. Thereafter he kept me by his side at all times and took great care of me. My Guru became my all. He was the sole object of my meditations. I was conscious of nothing and nobody except my Guru.

"There are other Gurus on whom disciples spend money, time and labour in the hope of gaining knowledge. These Gurus boast of secret knowledge, sing their own praises and make an exhibition of holiness. But their words do not touch the hearts of those who go to them and their disciples remain unconvinced. Such Gurus are not self realised men, so how can their followers benefit from them? But my Guru was of a different type. By his grace, realisation came to me without effort or study."

This account, as narrated by Sai Baba, is typical of him. It is full of symbolism and is not to be taken literally. This was Sai Baba's way of teaching his devotees that total devotion and submission to the right Guru was the best method, and one which he himself had followed to attain self-realisation.

The four young men who set out in search of God represent four different modes of approach. The dark forest is the unknown wherein the search is conducted. Baba's acceptance of a poor *vanjari's* offer of food indicates humility on the part of the seeker, because it was only after this that the Guru appeared and offered to show the way. The description of being tied head down inside a well is symbolical of the overturning of the ego.

Although it is generally held that it is the disciple who searches for and finds a Guru, Sai Baba made it quite clear that it was the other way around, and it is the Guru who draws his disciples to him. Sai Baba often said that if *his* man (devotee) was a thousand miles from Shirdi he could draw him to it "like a sparrow with a string tied to its leg".

The commonest experience of people who had never so much as heard of Sai Baba was that he first appeared to them in a dream. In the dream Sai Baba sometimes conveyed a cryptic message or a piece of advice which might make no sense to anyone else but could be of immense importance to the person concerned. There was often a time

iag between Baba's first appearance in a dream and that individual's subsequent realisation that the *fakir* of his dream, in the distinctive clothing and headgear, had been none other than Sai Baba of Shirdi.

Another fairly common experience of people was that once the desire arose in them to visit Shirdi, and see Sai Baba in person, unexpected circumstances and events conspired to make the trip possible. The following story is a typical example.

Kakaji Vaidya was a Hindu priest who lived in Vani, in Nasik District. Vaidya, a worshipper of the Goddess Sapta-Shringi, at one point of time found himself overwhelmed by all manner of calamities. As a result, he lost his peace of mind. One evening, when he felt he could no longer bear the many anxieties which beset him on all sides, Vaidya went to the Sapta-Shringi temple and invoked the Goddess's help to free him from his anxieties. That very night the Goddess appeared to him in a dream and instructed him to "go to Baba and your mind will be calm and composed." Unfortunately, Vaidya awakened from his sleep before he could ascertain from the Goddess the identity of the Baba he had been directed to see. Since Vaidya had never heard of Sai Baba of Shirdi he came to the conclusion that in referring him to "Baba", Sapta-Shringi wanted him to go to the Shiva temple at Tryambak. Vaidya spent ten days at Tryambakeshwar, where he diligently performed every ritual required in the worship of Lord Shiva. But on his return to Vani his mind was as

troubled and restless as before. Once again he besought Sapta-Shringi to help him and this time when she appeared to him in a dream the instructions to Vaidya were very clear. "Why did you go to Tryambakeshwar? When I told you to go and see Baba, I meant Shri Sai Samarth of Shirdi."

While Kakaji Vaidya was pondering the question of how and when to undertake the trip, a different and unrelated set of events which had unfolded in Shirdi, brought Sai Baba's companion and devotee Shama (Madhavrao Despande) to Vani.

This is how it happened.

During childhood Shama had been gravely ill. Fearing for his life, his mother had taken a vow before the family deity, who was none other than the Goddess Sapta-Shringi, that should the child survive, she would take him to Vani. For some reason, this was not done. Some years later, troubled by ringworm, Shama's mother had taken a second vow — to offer Sapta-Shringi two silver breasts on being cured of this disease. This vow too had remained unfulfilled. On her death bed she extracted a promise from Shama to visit Vani in person and also present two silver breasts to the temple of Sapta-Shringi at Vani. Shama forgot all about these unkept promises and 30 years passed by. At about the time that Kakaji Vaidya was instructed to visit Shirdi, Shama's younger brother consulted a famous astrologer who, among other things, told him that many of his family's problems were on account of the unfulfilled vows to the Goddess Sapta-Shringi.

When Shama was told of this he had a pair of silver breasts made. These he took to Sai Baba and offering them to him — because as far as he was concerned Sai Baba was the embodiment of all Gods and Goddesses — asked to be freed of his pledge. Sai Baba, however, insisted upon Shama undertaking the trip to Sapta-Shringi's temple at Vani.

Once he was in Vani, it was inevitable that Shama should meet Kakaji Vaidya. Who but the temple priest was qualified to perform the ritual connected with Shama's offering to the presiding deity?

Vaidya went to Shirdi with Shama and, as had been promised by Sapta-Shringi in his dream, he rediscovered his peace of mind. He stayed in Shirdi for twelve days, and returned to Vani a happy and contented man.

In the days before large crowds flocked to the Dwarkamai, many were the times when Sai Baba spent long hours in conversation with devotees who were close to him. On one such occasion, Nanasaheb Chandorkar (a man who prided himself on his knowledge of Sanskrit scriptures) was massaging Baba's legs while muttering to himself.

"Nana, what are you mumbling?" Baba asked.

"A Sanskrit verse — from the Bhagwad Gita."

"Say it aloud," Baba directed.

Nanasaheb who was certain that Sai Baba did not know any Sanskrit, recited verse 34 from the fourth chapter of the Gita.

> "*Tadviddhi Pranipatena Pariprashnena Sevaya, Upadekshyanti Te Jnanam Jnaninastattwadarshinah.*"*

"Do you understand it?" Sai Baba enquired when Nanasaheb finished the recitation.

And when Nana replied in the affirmative Sai Baba asked him to explain the meaning of the verse. The free translation rendered by Nana did not satisfy Sai Baba. He wanted the strict grammatical meaning of each and every word. Nana thereupon explained the verse word by word.

'Is mere prostration before the Guru enough?" Baba wanted to know.

"I don't know of any other meaning for the word pranipata," Nana replied.

"Never mind about that for the moment." Baba said. "What is *pariprashna*?"

"It means, asking questions."

"And what does *prashna* mean?"

"The same thing."

---

* "Learn by means of prostration, enquiry and service; the **Jnanis** (enlightened ones) who have realised the Truth will teach you **Jnana** (knowledge).

"If both words mean one and the same thing was the author of the Gita crazy? Why did he add the prefix *pari*?"

Nana could think of no suitable explanation for this apparent lapse.

"*Seva*," Baba continued. "What's meant by *seva*?"

"It means service — such as we render unto you," Nana replied promptly.

"And is it enough to render such service?"

"I don't know if it signifies anything more but that's what the word means."

Baba let the explanation pass unchallenged and went on to ask further questions.

"In the second line of the verse, can the word *jnana* be read as *ajnana*? And by reading it thus, does the meaning of the verse become clearer? Is there any objection to substituting *ajnana* for *jnana* if it makes better sense?"

Nana was frankly bewildered. How could substituting the word "ignorance" for "knowledge" make any sense, let alone better sense? Sai Baba however did not stop to explain.

"Why should Krishna have directed Arjuna to other *jnanis*?" he asked. "Wasn't Krishna himself a *jnani* — in fact *jnana* itself?"

"Yes, he was," Nana agreed. And though his pride was hurt, he now admitted his inability to understand the verse. Once this admission had been made, Sai Baba explained to Nanasaheb the true depth and meaning of the lines he had been mumbling by rote.

"This verse is a lesson in the correct approach to a Guru by a disciple in search of realisation. Mere physical prostration before a Guru is not enough. What is meant by *pranipata* is complete surrender. As for *pariprashna*, questions by a disciple should be put to the Guru out of a desire to attain spiritual progress and not out of idle curiosity or to trap the Guru into contradicting himself. And *seva* is not rendering service if the disciple retains the feeling that he has the freedom or choice to offer or withhold such service. The disciple must surrender himself so totally to the Guru that he should feel he exists only to serve the Guru."

Nana then asked what Sai Baba had meant when he had spoken of substituting the word *ajnana* (ignorance) for *jnana* (knowledge). How could a Guru teach ignorance?

"How does one impart realisation?" Baba asked rhetorically. "By destroying ignorance. Just as dispelling darkness means light, destruction of ignorance means knowledge. But how can ignorance be destroyed unless one knows the shape and form it takes and what it is comprised of? It takes a Guru to teach that it is ignorance to believe that

'I am the body', that it is ignorance to identify the body with the soul, that it is ignorance to think that God, world and *jiva* are different. Only a Guru can teach that all three are one and the same. How can anyone remove a thing unless they know what it is that has to be removed? That's why the Guru has first to teach the disciple what ignorance is comprised of — because only then can it be destroyed."

And why did Krishna refer Arjuna to other *jnanis*? Because he did not consider other *jnanis* in any way different from himself or their teachings at variance with his own. He considered other self-realised beings as one with him, and therefore which of them taught Arjuna could really make no difference.

But the path to Brahma-Jnana (self-realisation) is a difficult one. It is fraught with the hardships of treading a razor's edge. Brahma-Jnana was not to be had for the asking — even from a Sadguru of the stature of Sai Baba. The arduousness of such attainment was not known even to many of those who were close to Baba till one day a rich gentleman came to the Dwarkamai seeking instant Brahma-Jnana. The man's name and antecedents were not recorded but, fortunately, Baba's discourse on the subject was.

The man who wanted instant Brahma-Jnana was a man who had everything that money could

buy. Satiated with things temporal, he decided that the only thing which could make him happier still was the attainment of self-realisation. So when he heard about Sai Baba and how this miracle worker had fulfilled the desires of thousands of people he hired a tonga for the round trip and went to Shirdi.

On entering the Dwarkamai he fell at Sai Baba's feet.

"Baba, I've heard that you reveal the Brahma to all who come here," he began. "I've come a long way and am much fatigued by the journey but I will consider myself well rewarded if you will grant my wish."

"Do not be anxious," Baba told him, "I shall show you the Brahma. It's a rare man who is interested in spiritual matters. Most people come to me asking for health, wealth, power, position and honours. It will be a pleasure to reveal the Brahma to you."

Sai Baba engaged the visitor in small talk so that for a while at least the latter forgot his mission. Then Baba called a boy and directed him to the local moneylender with instructions to obtain an urgent loan of five rupees. The boy returned almost immediately to say that the moneylender's house was locked. Baba then directed him to the local grocer with the same instructions and once again the boy returned to say that the grocer could not be found. Sai Baba thereupon sent the boy to

a couple of other local people and each time the boy came back and reported that the individuals concerned were not available. The caller at the mosque was agitated by these activities because it was clear to him that Sai Baba was far too pre-occupied with obtaining five rupees for himself to reveal Brahma-Jnana to anyone. It seems it never occurred to the man that Sai Baba was testing him and that he could have easily put an end to these inanities by giving Baba five rupees from the wad of notes in his own pocket. Instead he sat at Baba's feet imploring him to show him the Brahma quickly as he had a hired tonga waiting and was in a hurry to return home.

"But, my dear friend, that's exactly what I have been doing," Baba explained. "Don't you see that to attain Brahma-Jnana you have to surrender five things! The five senses, the five *pranas,* the mind, the intellect and the ego."

Sai Baba then proceeded to outline the basic requisites in a seeker of Brahma-Jnana. These have been summarised as: (1) An intense desire to be free from bondage of any kind. (2) A feeling of disgust with all things temporal. (3) Introspection. (4) Catharsis from sins. (5) Right conduct. (6) Preference for the good to the pleasant. (7) Control of the mind and the senses. (8) Abandonment of the ego. (9) A Guru who is a self-realised man to show the way. And, (10) the Lord's Grace.

After he had explained each of these ten points

in detail to all who were present in the Dwarkamai, Sai Baba turned to his rich visitor.

"You, Sir," he said, "have in your pocket fifty times the five I was asking for."

The rich gentleman took out a bundle of notes and on counting them was surprised to find that he had exactly two hundred and fifty rupees on him.

"Roll up your bundle, my good man," Baba advised. "You whose mind is engrossed with wealth, progeny and prosperity cannot hope to know the *real* Brahma. Love for money is a whirlpool full of crocodiles in the form of conceit and jealousy. Greed and Brahma are poles apart — they are the eternal opposites. Even if there's a trace of greed in a man's mind, no *sadhanas* in the world will help him attain self-realisation. All the knowledge of a well-read man is utterly useless if he isn't free from the desire for rewards for his actions. A man has to have disgust for such things. Nor will any Guru's teachings be of any help to a man who hasn't rid himself of his ego. It is better therefore for one to ask for only that which one can assimilate. My treasury is full and I can give anyone what he wants, but I have to see whether he is qualified to receive it."

And though Sai Baba did not give his rich visitor Brahma-Jnana, he gave him his blessings, and the man left Shirdi wiser and more content with his lot.

IV

Times without number Sai Baba exhorted his followers not to attach undue importance to his physical presence in Shirdi or to his person as a flesh and blood man.

"I am not confined to these three-and-a-half cubits."

The body, he explained repeatedly, is perishable and transient. It is the self within which is the true reality.

Devotees who confined in Sai Baba that they depended totally upon him, and would flounder and be lost after he passed away, were reassured by him that he would be as active and vigorous in looking after their welfare even after his physical departure from their midst.

"If you think of me, I shall be by your side," he promised. "Then as now, cast your burden upon me and I shall bear it. Seek my help and I shall give it."

These assurances set many a troubled mind at rest because Sai Baba had amply demonstrated by his extraordinary powers that he was not limited by time and space, nor bound by laws of nature.

Though Sai Baba himself had given several indications to his devotees of the day on which he would be leaving his earthly body, reaction to the news of his death on the afternoon of Tuesday,

15th October 1918, was one of shock and disbelief. He had been running a fever for a couple of days, but nobody realised that he was about to depart from their midst.

It was only after his passing that it occurred to people that the first indication as to the day on which he would leave them had been given a full two years earlier. On the evening of Dassera day, in 1916, as the residents of Shirdi were returning home after celebrating Seemollanghan* (which, literally, means "crossing the border"), for no reason whatever, Sai Baba had flown into a terrible rage. Tearing off all his clothes, he had flung them into the *dhuni* (fire-pit) and struck the floor of the mosque with his wooden stick, shouting that this was *his* day for crossing the border. None of those who had been present realised the significance of this outburst — until two years later, in 1918, when on Dassera day (October 15 by the Gregorian calendar) at 2.30 p.m. he breathed his last.

Sai Baba's second indication to his devotees that his time on earth was drawing near was given

* When the Pandavas were sent into exile for 14 years after being defeated in battle by the Kauravas, the former concealed all their weapons of war in the foliage of a large shami tree. These trees generally grow on the borders of Indian towns and villages. When their exile came to an end, the Pandavas returned to collect their weaponry, and after worship of the tree for guarding their secret so well, they ventured into another battle with the Kauravas from which they emerged victorious.

Chhatrapati Shivaji, and all the Peshwa rulers who followed him, continued the Pandava tradition of worship of the shami tree on Seemollanghan day. Since Seemollanghan day coincides with Dassera day (the most auspicious in the Hindu calendar), it is of great significance, especially in Maharashtra.

shortly before 15th October 1918. Sai Baba had always kept a common brick by his side. A few days before Baba's death, a sweeper accidentally dropped it whilst cleaning the floor of the mosque, and it broke in two. When Baba was told about the mishap, he said "It's not the brick which is broken but my *karma*." No one realised the full import of his words.

On the morning of Tuesday, the 15th, close devotees who customarily lunched with him in the Dwarkamai were pointedly sent away. They, of course, knew that he had been ailing for some days, but it did not occur to anyone that death was imminent. To a well-to-do woman devotee, Laxmibai Shinde, Sai Baba gave nine rupees. He handed her the coins in two lots — first five rupees and then four. Those who witnessed the event interpreted it as Sai Baba's manner of acknowledging Laxmibai's devotion. The Bhagawata Purana lists the nine characteristics of a good disciple. Since the relevant couplet in the Bhagawata first enumerates five such characteristics and then goes on to mention four more, there was no doubt as to the significance of Baba's gesture in the minds of those who were present at the time.

As the afternoon of 15th October advanced, Sai Baba, who normally liked to be surrounded by his followers, made it a point to send them away from the Dwarkamai on one pretext or the other. When, finally, only one devotee remained by his side, Baba whispered into his ear that he wished

to be taken to the *dagdi wada**. Having expressed this wish, he slumped against his devotee's shoulder, and joined the ranks of the immortals.

The *dagdi wada* to which Sai Baba referred was a then recently completed building of palatial proportions. It had been built as a private residence by Baba's millionaire devotee, Bapusaheb Booty of Nagpur.

At the turn of the century, there had been only two *wadas* for accommodating visitors to Shirdi — Sathe's and Dixit's. After Booty decided to live in Shirdi with his family, it occurred to him that it would be in the fitness of things to build himself a house there. Shortly after Booty had thought of this, Sai Baba appeared to him in a dream and ordered him to build a *wada* of his own in Shirdi, and to make certain that the building also housed a temple. That same night Baba's other devotee, Madhavrao Deshpande, dreamt a similar dream except that in Deshpande's dream Baba added that after the *wada* and the temple were ready, "I shall fulfil the desires of all."

The two men compared notes on awakening the next morning, and arrived at the conclusion that Sai Baba's orders must be carried out at the earliest. Bapusaheb Booty was rich as well as capable, and with Deshpande's assistance he drew up a building plan which both men then placed before Sai Baba for his approval. This was given immediately.

* A building (in this case, made of stone) with one or more central courtyards.

"After the temple is complete, I shall come and stay there," Sai Baba told them. "We shall use the *wada*, and all of us will be very happy in it."

The site chosen for the building was behind the plot of land on which Baba had tended a garden during his early years in Shirdi.

As the construction of the building neared completion, a statue of Murlidhar* was ordered for installation in the sanctum sanctorum of the temple which formed a part of the residential building.

It was at this juncture that Sai Baba attained Maha-Samadhi.

When news of his passing spread through the village of Shirdi and its surroundings, people thronged to the Dwarkamai in their hundreds. Their faces reflected sorrow, bewilderment and concern. What would happen to them now that their beloved guide and mentor of sixty years was dead? To make matters worse, within hours of his death an unfortunate and unseemly controversy arose amongst them as to where Sai Baba should be buried. (There was never any question of cremating him because even among the Hindus, a Realised Man is always buried.) While one group was of the opinion that Baba's remains should be interred in the open field pointed out by him to Mhalasapati 32 years earlier and a tomb constructed over it, a second group was equally determined that he should be laid to rest in the newly built temple in Booty's *wada*. The arguments raged back and forth for over

* Another name for Lord Krishna.

36 hours, and the question was finally settled by a plebiscite.

Since the last words spoken by Sai Baba were, "Take me to the *dagdi wada*", the majority voted in favour of his being buried in the sanctum sanctorum of the new temple. And the house that Booty built became one of the holiest shrines in the country.

The passing of one who is not an ordinary man always creates a great emptiness, and Sai Baba had been extraordinary by any standards. But the void was soon filled.

The first indication Sai Baba gave of his continuing presence was in under 24 hours of his death. In the early morning of Wednesday, the 16th, he appeared in a dream to Laxman Joshi, the village astrologer. Tugging at his hand, Baba told Joshi to wake up because, "Bapusaheb thinks I am dead, so he won't come to the Dwarkamai for the morning prayers."

That same morning another devotee, Das Ganu Maharaj, who was in Pandharpur and had not yet heard of Baba's death, also dreamt of him.

"I've come to tell you that I had to leave the mosque," Baba told him. "Please go there and cover my body with flowers."

Neither Laxman Joshi nor Das Ganu Maharaj doubted for a moment that though Sai Baba had discarded his earthly body, he continued to be in their midst — as had been promised by him. As this realisation dawned on other Shirdi devotees too, the shock and grief wore off, and people went about their daily routine exactly as though Sai Baba was still amongst them.

Epilogue

A sense of presence still pervades the Dwarkamai, the Samadhi Mandir, and indeed all of Shirdi. To those in urgent need of help and guidance, Sai Baba appears in dreams and visions, and the succour provided is no less potent than it was during his lifetime. Prayers are answered, hopes and wishes fulfilled, sickness and diseases cured, and all manner of problems solved so effectively that his following continues to multiply. People experience strange and inexplicable happenings, many of which are nothing short of miraculous. Nor are such phenomena restricted to those who have heard about him, or believe in him. People from all walks of life, and from all parts of the country, *continue* to be drawn to Shirdi, and Sai Baba, in exactly the same manner as they had during his lifetime. Except that the names of the experiencers are different, there is virtually no dissimilarity in happenings prior to October 15, 1918, and those reported even today.

Glossary

Aarati — devotional song usually forming part of ritual worship

Ahankara — the false identification of the inner self with the body, the mind or the outside world.

Ajnana — opposite of jnana

Archana — ceremonial worship of God

Asana — any of the postures in a yoga exercise

Atmanivedana — total dedication of self to God or Guru

Bhakti — selfless devotion as a means of reaching Brahma

Bidi — a short conical cigarette wrapped in tobacco leaf

Brahma — the impersonal supreme being; the primal source and ultimate goal of all beings with which the soul when enlightened knows itself to be identical.

Chana — chick peas

Chavadi — guest house

Chillum — clay pipe

Dakshina — monetary offerings to God or Saint

Dasya — servant status vis-a-vis God or Guru

Deva — God

Fakir — mendicant monk, usually Muslim

Guru — a preceptor giving personal religious instruction

Jiva — being

Jnana — knowledge acquired through

meditation and study as a means of reaching Brahma

Karma — action, seen as bringing upon oneself inevitable results, good or bad, either in this life or in a reincarnation.

Khanda Yoga — an advanced stage of Hatha Yoga (yoga of violence) in which the yogin can separate any part of his body for some length of time — again to be rejoined.

Kirtana — frequent repetition of the Guru's teachings

Leela — doings, especially miraculous doings

Maha-Samadhi — the highest state of samadhi

Mamlatdar — a revenue officer (below the rank of Dy. Collector) invested with certain magisterial powers

Mantra — incantations

Maruti — another name of Hanuman

Masjid — mosque

Maulana — (in India), an expert in Islamic law; a term of respectful address among Muslims.

Namaskara — a reverential bow

Padasevana — service of God evidenced through reverent touching of the Guru's feet

Pandit — (in India) a Brahman with profound knowledge of Sanskrit, Hindu law, etc.

Parvardigar — God

Pedha — sweetmeat

Pir — holy man

Pranas — the vital breaths moving in

the body

Prasad — an offering of food or flowers blessed by God

Rishi — an inspired sage

Sadguru — supreme Guru

Sadhaka — aspirant

Sadhanas — spiritual endeavours

Sakhya — literally, friendliness. Here indicative of love for God or Guru

Samadhi — a trancelike state of pure consciousness, undisturbed by the polarities of life, experience and thought. The power to enter into samadhi is a precondition of attaining release from the cycle of rebirths. The death of a person having this power is also considered a samadhi. The site where a person believed to be so empowered was buried is, in modern times, also referred to as a Samadhi

Shravana — the act of listening to the Guru's teachings

Siddha — a realised man (or woman)

Smarana — constant remembrance of the Guru's teachings

Udhi — sacred ash

Upanishads — philosophical discourses dated around 500 B.C.

Urus — birthday celebrations

Vanjari — gypsy

Wada — building with one or more central courtyard

Ya — welcome